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A. TOUSSAINT AUGUSTE: The Barnyard



RENAISSANCE IN

HAITI

POPULAR PAINTERS IN THE BLACK REPUBLIC

by Selden Rodman

PELLEGRINI & CUDAHY

New York

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

While dedicating this book to the painters of Haiti, and to DeWitt Peters, without whose taste, understanding and love there would have been no renaissance, I would like also to express my gratitude for help in preparing the manuscript, first to my wife, and second to the following friends of my five visits to Haiti: Edouard Mathon, William and Margaret Krauss, Fortuné and Edith Efron Bogat, Sheelagh O'Malley, Tina Leser, Emmanuel Lédan, Jean Chenet and Philippe Thoby-Marcelin.

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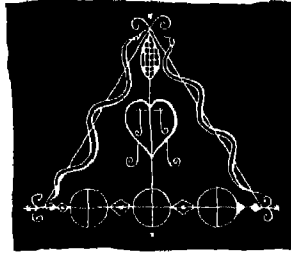
RENAISSANCE IN HAITI



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FOREGROUND TO BACKGROUND



*"I want to know a butcher paints,
A baker rhymes for his pursuit,
Candlestick-maker much acquaints
His soul with song, or, haply mute,
Blows out his brains upon the flute."*

ROBERT BROWNING

Haiti, the populous and impoverished "Black Republic" which occupies the mountainous western third of Hispaniola between Cuba and Puerto Rico, has been experiencing a nationwide artistic awakening rivaled in our time only by that of Mexico. When the Parisian gallery-goers, probably the most critical art public in the world, attended the international exhibit of paintings from thirty nations assembled in Paris by UNESCO in 1947 and pronounced the Haitian contingent the most original, they were testifying to the same delight which had already overwhelmed the occasional traveler who wandered unsuspectingly into the Centre d'Art in Port-au-Prince. Here was a country, a small country, but perhaps the first since the days of the Renaissance, where people painted as unself-consciously as children yet expressed through their art the accumulated richness of centuries of religious ceremonial and folklore. Indeed painting in Haiti was already coming to be considered a more lucrative occupation than agriculture or shopkeeping. Sometimes whole villages would turn out to celebrate a local artist's achievement. Yet as recently

as 1938, M. J. Herskovits, the eminent anthropologist and author of *Life in a Haitian Valley*, had felt compelled to write that "the absence of graphic and plastic arts in Haitian culture . . . the suppression of these forms of the prevalent African tradition . . . would seem to have lost to the Haitian an important outlet for the resolution of inner tensions."

There were few, ten years ago, who would have disagreed with him. The great tradition of African sculpture, stamped out among the Negro slaves as potentially subversive by the French in the 18th century, appeared to have been stamped out permanently. No painting of any value was known to have originated in the Republic of Haiti since its inception in 1804. The fine Dahomean art of appliqué had yielded to the stenciled burlap altar cloth and the two-color Pillsbury floursack. In the village of Mirebalais, where Herskovits had done his field work, there are no native huts with exterior wall-paintings, and if an educated Haitian had described one of these to him it would have been remarkable, because the educated Haitian of that period traveled for the most part in France, or if he journeyed at home out of necessity, kept his eyes as far from the uncouth peasant and all his works as he could.

Dr. Herskovits, who shares with Professor Leyburn¹ of Yale University the distinction of being the only foreigner of recent times to have looked sympathetically as well as critically into the mysteries of Haitian life, can hardly be charged with negligence for not reporting that in 1938 a book-keeper in Cap-Haitien was spending his nights painting scenes from Haitian history for a Masonic Temple where they were hung in a dark vestibule. Nor could he have known that in Port-au-Prince an overworked taxi driver was precisely modeling some Chinese roses on a cracked tooth-mug, while an apprentice airplane mechanic wondered how much he could improve the strange little genre drawings he had been making for years if he had paint and brushes. It is conceivable, though not likely, that if Dr. Herskovits had gone to St.-Marc instead of to Mirebalais he would have heard about a half-starved "voodoo priest" who claimed to have seen the wonders of Dahomey and Ethiopia in his youth and who was then agreeing to paint flowers and birds on a barroom door for a couple of bottles of ceremonial wine.

Nobody but a Standard Oil salesman on his yearly stop at the isolated south-coast village of Bainet could have known that a vaguely ambitious cob-

¹ *The Haitian People* (Yale University Press, 1941). Harold Courlander's valuable and authoritative *Haiti Singing* (University of North Carolina Press, 1939) should also be mentioned in this connection.



Sculptors with Jason Seley

bler was sketching chickens and palm trees on discarded Esso calendars. And only a mind reader could have described the visions of unearthly beauty that passed through the minds of a police stenographer in Bizoton, an itinerant tailor in Carrefour, a house-boy in Jacmel, a carpenter in Anse-à-Veau and two youngsters of seven and nine in Bolosse who were quite possibly at that moment dancing with their elders to the drums at a *mangé-loa* or watching a boisterous round of bezique at a local wake.

From 1938 to 1947

Less than ten years have passed. In an imposing galleried building situated appropriately enough on the Rue de la Revolution close to the center of Port-au-Prince the aspirations of these eleven Haitians, and of several score of others hardly less talented, have found a focus. In one of the exhibition rooms upstairs, the founder and director, DeWitt Peters, with his two Haitian assistants, Jean Chenet and Emmanuel Ledan, is explaining to a group of white visitors why the prices on certain canvases are lower than on similar

ones shown recently in Paris and New York. In the courtyard below stands the Centre d'Art's green jeep, painted in Sapolin from trunk to hood with brilliant scenes from Haitian life; it has just come back from a field trip to Plaisance in the North, loaded with prize pictures from a local children's competition. In a downstairs gallery Haiti's "sophisticated" painters are hanging a show. In another, visiting Cuban and Mexican artists are giving a demonstration in lithography. A third is given over to a sculpture workshop supervised by Jason Seley of New York. In a fourth, photographs of paintings are being taken—photographs soon to appear in *Life*, *Art News* and the *Magazine of Art* in New York, in *The Changing Nation* and *Picture Post*, London, in the avant-garde periodicals of Paris, Havana and Mexico City.

From Cap-Haïtien, Haiti's second city, word has come that Philomé Obin, the one-time bookkeeper and decorator of Masonic temples whose works now hang in private collections from California to Long Island, will hold a provincial exhibition of the work of his ten best pupils.

Far to the south, in Bainet, the fame of the cobbler, Micius Stephane, erstwhile embellisher of Esso signs, has introduced a characteristically quattrocento note into the long-standing Capulet-Montague rivalry of that seaport's two leading families: which of the embattled clans can claim Stephane's kinship? and will the family that fails succeed in patronizing a rival artist of comparable skill?

In the Centre d'Art itself, the basement "studio" has become a workshop for all the painters' related crafts. Rigaud Bénoit, who once painted roses on tooth-mugs, supervises the younger artists in the production of linoleum-block prints for Christmas cards and book illustration. The sales of his paintings in New York are matched only by those of Castera Bazile and Dieu-donné Cédor, long since removed from Jacmel and Anse-à-Veau, who now superintend the making of painted boxes and screens, wardrobes and chairs decorated with floral abstractions, exquisite enameled trays and table-tops; designs for textiles, embroidery, even chess sets and jewelry.

But Peters, the instigator and overseer of all this activity, discovered that too-early association has its drawbacks. Obin's pupils tended to paint like Obin. The brilliant box-makers, Brochard Jean-Jacques and Gabriel Lévêque, failed to go much beyond the inspiration of Bazile and Cédor. Louverture Poisson, the sergeant at Bowen Field, lost some of the magical quality of his first pictures when he became educated to the point of seeing the resemblance between his own work and that of the surrealists but not far enough to assimilate their flavor without losing his own. Peters therefore encouraged



Box-Making at the Centre d'Art

the more talented younger painters to work at home, at least until their individual styles had "set" beyond premature influence.

The results have been rewarding. Fernand Pierre, the tailor of Carrefour, works slowly, but he has never brought in a second-rate painting, nor has he ever repeated himself. Enguérrand Gourgue, now seventeen, whom we observed ten years back absorbing the rhythms of a *mangé-loa* with Wilson Bigaud, has become the painter par excellence of "Black Magic"; while Bigaud himself, most versatile and ambitious of the popular artists, has left the Centre where he had begun to paint proficient but lifeless imitations of Cuban work, for his *caille* in the capital's red-light district whence came his early "Wake" (Plate 22) and his more recent "Dice Game" (Colorplate I).

The "voodoo priest" of St.-Marc, acknowledged master of them all, and

himself "discoverer" of Bigaud, Gourgue and Gabriel Alix, comes often to the Centre, but the indulgent eye he casts upon the work of his pupils, and upon the occasional paintings by such moderns as Wifredo Lam, Marsden Hartley and Ben Shahn, remains undazzled by alien light, unconfused by variety. For Hector Hyppolite paints as he lives, a man possessed by demanding but rewarding spirits. The amazement of André Breton, the praise of René d'Harnoncourt, please but do not impress him. Other painters may hopefully bring their wares to the Centre for criticism or attention; visiting celebrities are glad to make their way through the overpopulated mud streets of portside Trou-de-Cochon to Hector Hyppolite's thatched *tonnelle*.¹

It is closing time at the Centre d'Art. Corporal Minium Cayemitte, the police stenographer of Bizoton, wishes a word with the director. He has important work to do and little time to do it. He must finish "The Miraculous Rain" and begin his third picture, "The Magic Tree" (Plate 31). May he spend his nights at the Centre from now on? Peters, who must consider the family situations of his enthusiastic charges as well as their aesthetic well-being, ponders the question. But at that moment there is a tumult of shouting and singing in the street below. Some time ago a picture had been sent to the framer with the request for an early return. There it is, being borne aloft by two messengers, to the cheers of the constantly growing crowd. The director surrenders to their excitement. "Where else in the world," he says later with understandable pride, "where else, at any time except perhaps in Renaissance Italy, would people have cheered a painting through the streets?"

DeWitt Peters, Impresario

Peters himself, when he came to Port-au-Prince for the first time in February of 1943, would certainly have agreed with Dr. Herskovits about the extinction of the arts in Haiti. The idea of founding an art center was as far from his mind as discovering a school of primitive painters. Indeed he had no particular interest in primitivism. Himself an experienced artist who had lived for years in Paris and exhibited in New York, he tended to regard primitive painting as something to be outgrown, or perhaps as a fad—at best the charming product of amateurs, like the "Sunday painters" of France who had flourished briefly in the wake of Henri Rousseau's acclamation by the Cubists.

Peters had come to Haiti in wartime as one of a group of English teachers

¹ News of Hyppolite's death in the summer of 1948 arrived shortly before this book went to press.



DeWitt Peters

sponsored by the United States Department of Education, a "Good Neighbor" agency. It took less than six months to convince him that teaching was not enough, that there were things Haiti needed more than the English language. He began to wonder, as he wrote later, "why in a country of such hypnotic beauty, with a climate as lucent as Southern Italy's and a people favored with leisure, is the art of painting practically moribund? Why, in this haunting city of 150,000, rich in history, literally shimmering with color, is there no single art gallery, no art shop, not even a nook where a painting can be hung for people to see?"¹

Peters resigned his job at the Lycée in August, 1943, but it was not until April, 1944, that a temporary building could be found for the art center. A month later, under the joint sponsorship of the Haitian government and the American Embassy and a small but enthusiastic committee of Haitian intellectuals, the Centre d'Art was officially opened by President Elie Lescot. Popular painting was yet to be discovered; but for the occasion Peters

¹ *Harpers Bazaar* (January, 1947). The last patron of Haitian art, Peters was told, had been King Henry Christophe (1807-20), who, in a final gesture of defiance to Napoleon had imported and installed an English drawing master named Evans in the palace of Sans Souci at Milot to polish elegantly whatever provincialisms the education of the royal princesses might have suffered at the hands of their Philadelphia governess.

assembled the first exhibit of contemporary Haitian art ever held in Haiti. The response was overwhelming: "Excited crowds packed the galleries. A country, tiny and poor in monetary wealth, learned to its astonishment that twenty-three pictures had been sold for more than \$500, down here a truly fabulous sum."

From mid-1945 to the present the Centre d'Art has managed to scrape along on a subsidy of \$400 a month, half of which has been contributed by the Haitian government and half by the Institut Haitian-American, assisted by the U.S. State Department. Since September, 1946, Peters' modest salary has been paid through a grant to the Institut. But these figures hardly tell the story. In the month of February, 1948, income from the sale of popular paintings in Port-au-Prince alone amounted to \$2,639.50, of which sum \$2,024.20 went into the pockets of perhaps fifty peasant-artists whose annual cash income in years before had probably been less than \$25.00. The balance, \$615.30, went into a Reserve Fund out of which sick or needy artists are paid a monthly stipend and from which meager supplies for the tiny branches in the provinces are financed.

Looking further ahead, the Estimé government has agreed to help raise funds to build a new and permanent Centre d'Art, for which architect Robert Bausson has already drawn up the plans; work in fresco and other mural techniques is expected to be encouraged; and popular painting promises to be a major attraction in the International Exhibition to be held in the capital in January, 1949.

Background

Before we go on to consider the genesis of this art, its flowering, its roots and its meaning, it may be profitable to digress a little on the subject of Haiti itself. Upon the landscape, the people and their habitations, what portents were to be found of yearning after self-expression? Briefly, what happened in this strange land between the suppression of African craftsmanship and its transmuted rebirth today?

It is a truism that Haiti is a land of mountains. Some are vivid with sub-tropical jungle growth, but many more, on which the shadows of clouds hang like great bats, are as bare and wrinkled as the hide of a caiman. Anyone who has climbed them afoot, in the saddle, or where a jeep may go (there are few roads for more upholstered travel—indeed there are few roads) will have proved for himself the validity of the peasant proverb: "Beyond the mountains there are more mountains."

Freedom is supposed to thrive in mountainous country. The mountains of Hispaniola didn't save the peace-loving aboriginal Indians (Arawaks) who were wiped out by Columbus and his Spanish successors before 1510. But they did shelter the escaped African slaves (*marrons*) of a later century, and the American Marines of the era of Dollar Diplomacy learned to curse them in several languages.

It was the *marrons* who formed the hard core of the War of Independence touched off by the French Revolution and it is probably they whom we may



Crucifixion: Woodcut by Dieudonné Cédor

thank for the hardy persistence of Africanisms—linguistic, religious and cultural—in Haiti today. Between the time of the Treaty of Ryswick in 1697 when the western third of Hispaniola was formally ceded to the descendants of the French buccaneers, and 1791, when Boukman, the voodoo¹ *papaloi* set torch to the fabulous plantations of the Plaine du Nord, the French imported several million African slaves into Haiti. Saint-Domingue (not to be

¹ Voodoo, or *vodun* as it will be more properly referred to from now on, is an African word signifying "spirit," and has become the general name for the religion of the Haitian peasant. Its priests, now called *houngans*, were once known as *papaloi*.

confused with Santo Domingo, or the Dominican Republic, which then—as now—occupied the eastern two-thirds of the island of Hispaniola in true Spanish style) had become in the closing decades of the 18th century the richest colony in the world. Producing all of the sugar and most of the coffee and indigo for Europe, it was administered by a royal colony consisting of some 30,000 French. Trade, for the most part, was in the hands of a class of 20,000 mulatto freed-men who hated the French for discriminating against them socially and politically, and despised the slaves from whose ranks they had so recently sprung. The basic work was done by the 500,000 black slaves. The condition of the latter was so terrible that the entire number, it is said, perished and had to be replaced every twenty years.

It is not surprising that in the wake of the slave-ship, the auction block, the whip and the wheel, the arts of Africa disappeared. The wonder is that the tradition itself survived underground, that African religious ritual persisted. Moreau de St.-Méry, who had spent ten years in the colony just before the revolt of 1791 and who published his monumental work on St.-Domingue in 1797, thus describes *vodun* in colonial days:

It is logical to believe that Vaudoux owes its origin to the cult of the serpent to which the people of Juida are particularly given. They say it originated in the kingdom of Ardra on the slave-coast; and after reading to what a pitch these Africans pushed their superstition for this animal it is easy to recognize it again in what I have just reported. (The Malabar Indians also worship the snake; they call it Nalle Pambou: "Good Snake.")

What is very real and at the same time very remarkable in Vaudoux is a sort of magnetic power which compels the participants to dance until they lose consciousness. The contagion is so strong that Whites found spying on the mysteries of this sect and touched by one of the cultists discovering them, have sometimes started to dance and have eventually had to go so far as to pay the Vaudoux Queen to put an end to their torment. However, I cannot help but observe that no member of the police force—sworn to combat Vaudoux—has ever felt this compulsion to dance, which (if exerted) would no doubt have saved the dancers themselves from the necessity of taking flight.

Doubtless, to soft-pedal the alarm that this mysterious cult of Vaudoux has aroused in the Colony, they (the slaves) pretend to dance it in public, to the sound of drums and handclapping; they even follow it

with a meal at which nothing but fowl is eaten. But I am certain that this is merely a further device to circumvent the vigilance of the magistrates and to assure the success of those shadowy secret assemblies which are not held for amusement or pleasure but rather as a sort of school where the weak souls surrender to a domination which a thousand circumstances can render disastrous.

It is hard to imagine in what complete subjection the Vaudoux chiefs are able to hold the other members of the sect. Not one among the latter but would prefer anything to the horrors that threaten him if he does not go assiduously to the meetings and blindly obey what Vaudoux demands of him. We have seen some so seized with terror they lost all reason; who, in attacks of frenzy, uttered shrieks and howls, lost any resemblance to the human being, and aroused one's pity. In a word, nothing is more dangerous on every score than this Vaudoux cult, founded on an absurdity, yet capable, because of its belief that the possessing Spirits know everything and can do anything, of being turned into a terrible weapon.

Who would believe that something even surpassing Vaudoux goes also under the name of "dance"! In 1768, a Negro of Spanish origin in Petit-Gôave, taking advantage of Negro credulity in superstitious practice, suggested the idea of a dance analogous to Vaudoux but in which the movements are more precipitous. To make the tafia which they drink while dancing even more potent they add dashes of well-crushed gunpowder. This so-called Dance of Don Pedro, or simply Don Pedro, has been known to kill some Negroes; the spectators themselves, electrified by the spectacle of this convulsive exercise share the intoxication of the actors; singing and beating rapid time they accelerate the spasm which in some degree seizes them all. It has become necessary to prohibit the dancing of Don Pedro under heavy but not always efficacious penalties.

The avaricious planters and their indolent wives had reason to be alarmed. There is not standing intact, the length and breadth of Haiti today, a single structure dating from the colonial period; crumbling gate-posts in the North, a vault incorporated in a building of later date, a ruined aqueduct where water has not flowed for over a century, are witnesses to the characteristic intractability of a class that ruled by fear in an atmosphere of guilt. Yet a very few compromises might have sufficed to alter the picture. Instead of attaching the property interests of the freed mulattoes to their own, the colo-

nists responded to the libertarian decrees of the States-General of 1789 by publicly breaking the mulatto leaders, Ogé and Chavannes, on the rack.

Ten years later, their ranks decimated by civil war, emigration and disease, the planters rejected the conciliatory efforts of Toussaint Louverture, allying themselves first with Robespierre's unscrupulous commissar, Sonthonax, and later with Napoleon's brother-in-law Leclerc, who had been dispatched with an army and fleet to recapture the colony and reimpose

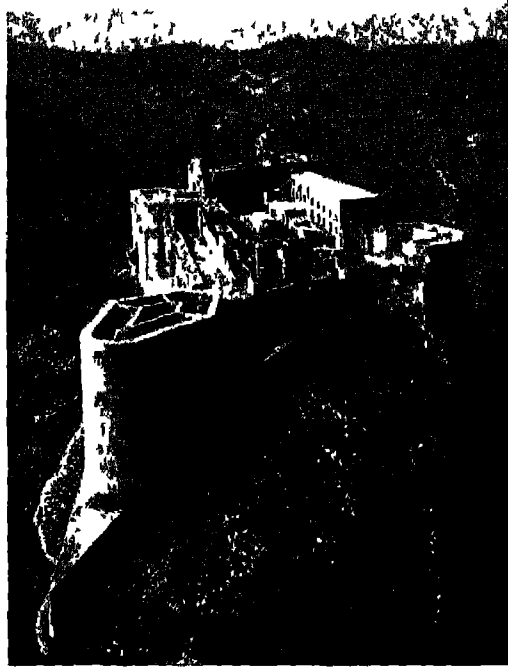


Toussaint Louverture
by Jean Clappini

slavery. Toussaint, a man of extraordinary vision, had seen clearly that the island's prosperity could be maintained only by large-scale agriculture, and that this in turn depended on discipline, the kind of discipline that could be enforced in the first years of independence at least, only by an alliance of French managers and Negro rulers. With Toussaint's betrayal aboard a French frigate in Gonaïves harbor in June of 1802, the power fell into the hands of the extremists among his lieutenants. Dessalines, a ferocious African-born chieftain whose indelible impression of white civilization had been formed aboard a noisome slaver in his youth, assumed the emperorship on a slogan of total black supremacy. The independence of Haiti was proclaimed. Mulattoes were slaughtered indiscriminately with Europeans with the result that following Dessalines' assassination in October of 1806, a racial and geographical schism took place in Haiti which has persisted in one form or another, and with disastrous consequences, to this day.

In the predominantly "black" North, Henry Christophe, perhaps the ablest administrator in the history of his race, and the most ambitious, proclaimed himself king. Without Toussaint's remarkable poise and tact, he carried the latter's system of disciplined production to a point of totalitarian perfection. Cultured, intelligent and industrious, Christophe nevertheless became the victim of his passion for supervising the individual life and even the soul of every one of his subjects, and of his compulsion to build grandiose retreats on almost inaccessible mountain peaks. The last and largest of these fortresses with which the King defied Napoleon is today all that survives the avalanche of human fury that brought him down. His suicide in 1820 put a period to the rationalized prosperity of Haiti.

Meanwhile, in the South, impervious to Christophe's sporadic military campaigns, another veteran general of the War of Independence was establishing an economic pattern for Haiti that was to endure to this day. Alexandre Pétion, a cultured mulatto *affranchi* who had traveled in France, was suave, easy-going, popular. He was revolted by the excesses and philosophy of Dessalines as symbolized in the words of the latter's secretary: "To draw up the Act of Independence, we used the skin of a white man for parchment, his skull for an inkstand, his blood for ink and a bayonet for pen." Yet for all his enlightenment Pétion contributed more than any other man to the economic and political chaos of Haiti. Under the absolute dictators the country had continued rich; when he died in 1818 the land had been parceled out, first to the aristocrats and next to the soldiers and the peasants; the production of sugar had almost ceased; the treasury was empty.



Christophe's Citadel "La Ferrière"

The enduring pattern of Haiti—free but poverty-stricken—was solidified under Pétion's mulatto successor, Boyer (1818–43), but thereafter came a change which proved to be of great importance in preserving the African tradition. Toussaint, Christophe and Dessalines, knowing full well the subversive possibilities of nocturnal gatherings, had proscribed *vodun* ceremonies. Pétion and Boyer, on the other hand, did not deign to mention the vulgar superstitions of the folk in their decrees. In 1844, there came to power by revolution the first of a series of black presidents, in the person of an illiterate octogenarian, Guérrier, Christophe's Duc de Marmelade. Guérrier and his three successors, the last of whom was the despotic but hopelessly incompetent Faustin Soulouque (Emperor Faustin I) ruled Haiti for twenty-four years. Another significant pattern was established. Whether by necessity or design, the mulatto élite henceforth exercised its power mainly in the market.

From the time of Boyer's successor to the American Marine occupation in 1915 only three light-skinned men became president.

Dessalines' constitution had separated the Roman Catholic Church from the new State; Pétion and Boyer, both indifferent to organized religion, had made little effort to heal the schism. Under Soulouque (1847-59) *vodun* was in effect the State religion. The fifty-five years between 1805 and 1860 were therefore decisive in permitting African religious belief to become too deeply rooted in the masses to be torn out by the campaigns of the Church that were to follow. Speaking of the dualism of the period after 1860, Professor Leyburn says: "The new Catholic priests, then, met no hostility; what they had to deal with was an ineradicable folk religion which accepted everything and rejected little in the spiritual realm." By 1940 three million predominantly illiterate Haitians were in the charge of 205 priests, only eight of whom were Haitians. Moreover education of the élite (there is very little general education in Haiti) was entirely in the hands of the clergy—supported financially by the State.

How the Arts Survived

We come back to Dr. Herskovits' challenging statement about the extinction of the graphic and plastic arts.

It is into the mountains or remote coastal plains that one must go for direct evidence to the contrary; only there may one see the painted walls and occasional carved figures that escaped the archeologist's keen scrutiny. Indirect evidence survives in the larger towns only in the materials and shape of the African thatched hut (*caille*), the painted animal-head masks worn at Mardi Gras and Ra-Ra dances, and perhaps the accoutrements of the *vodun* ceremony itself: the *asson*, the *houngan's* gourd rattle with a bell, laced about with alternating snake vertebrae and colored-glass beads; the painted *'rada* drum; the *paquet congo*, a bottle-shaped fetish of sateen and colored ribbons decorated very beautifully to resemble a dancing woman with sequins, gold earrings and ostrich feathered top-knot; the porous stick, shaped like a wand, and delicately painted to resemble a snake; the *vevers*, extemporaneous geometrical religious drawings in flour which not infrequently achieve the perfection of great abstract art.

The peasant wall-paintings will not be found in Port-au-Prince, or along the beaten track. Haiti is perhaps the only country in this hemisphere where there are no more than two beaten tracks: one, the arduous 180-mile road to

Vodun Ceremonial Objects



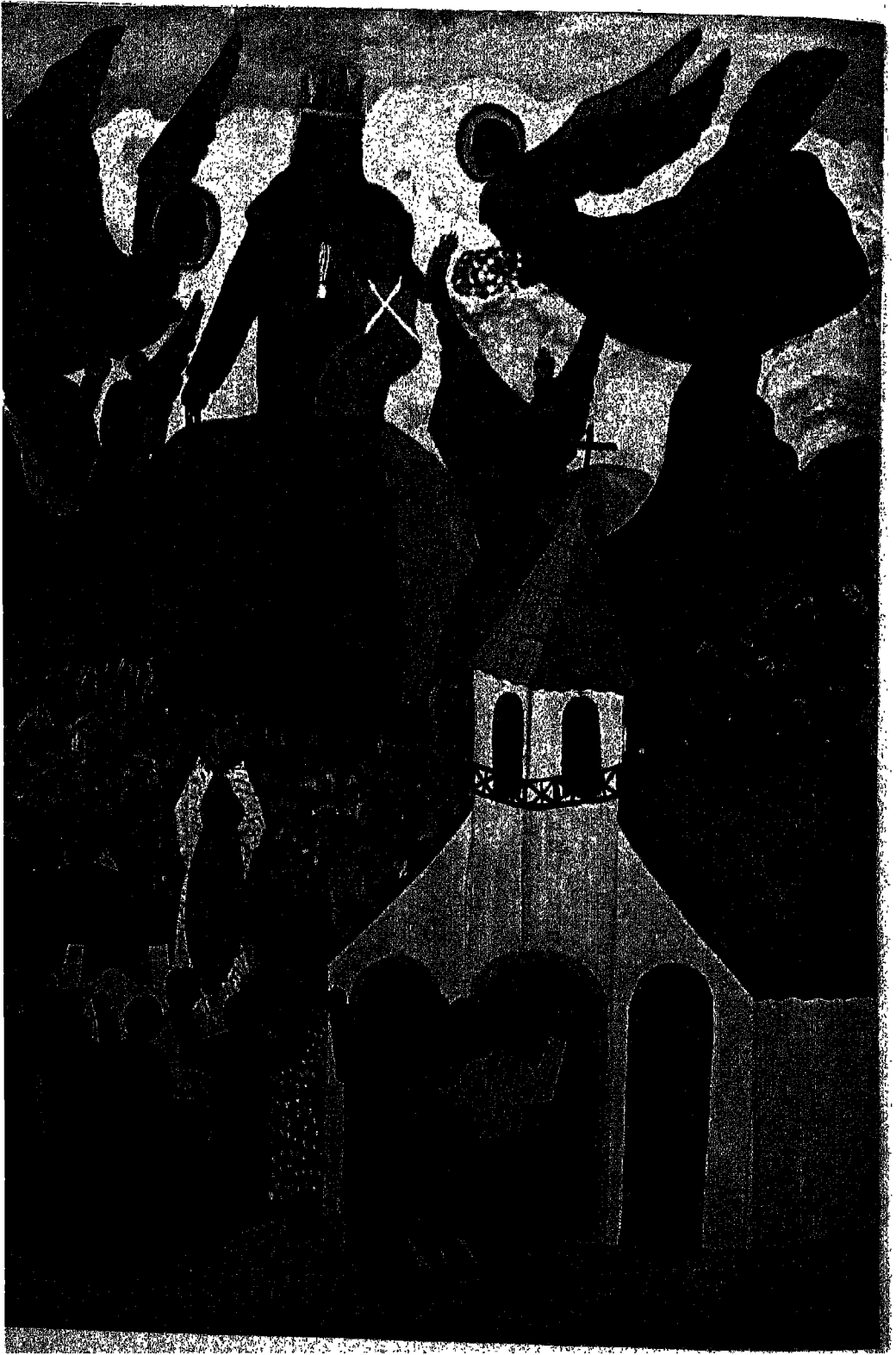
Cap-Haitien, where Christophe's nearby palace of Sans Souci and Citadel inevitably lure the tourist; the other a well-macadamed scenic drive of fifteen miles to Kenscoff, a mountain resort lying 5,000 feet above the capital.

There is beauty enough even in the latter. Along the miles of flaming poinsettia walk women of great dignity, with calabashes dangling from their head-baskets, and mountain men, clad in tattered floursacks, but very proud of their machetes and their eagle-vision. Only a little farther back in the mountains, where Morne La Selle's 8,950 feet begin to rise and the bare ranges roll away in every direction, were the members of three family groups, symbolizing poignantly the paradoxical misery and serenity of peasant life: the madonna with yaws whose child is almost certain to grow up with it; the family living in hardly less squalor than its emaciated pigs, in the very shadow of banana and breadfruit trees; the thrifty (or perhaps lucky) peasant



Peasant Groups: Kenscoff Road

B. CASIERA BAZILE: Adoration of the Virgin II



woman with her bowl of golden grain and tied-up corn—chairs, dresses, sleeping-mats and earthen floor immaculately tidy.

Only a few hundred yards from this composed family, in the crumbling colonial cemetery of Furcy, one could discover evidence of native pictorial talent. Two freshly dug graves had been marked with crosses, gaily and brilliantly painted in black and white, with a few spots of cerulean. The workmanship is delicate, precise; the design wholly abstract. It is not strange that death should have inspired this wayward beauty. Death to the primitive mind is not the ultimate tragedy, and never accidental. The wake is as much a time of merrymaking and social-aesthetic intercourse, as of sorrow. The spirit of the dead man himself is present and will remain present, though less actively as time goes on, until finally he becomes one of the local deities, hallowed by time, and uniting (by his power to make the rains come and the crops grow) the Negro to his local habitation and his land.

The painted *caille* in Boisilmé, along a secondary road from St.-Marc to Gonaïves in the Artibonite lowlands, appears to owe its spirals and crosses to a sheer exuberance in decoration. It was, to be sure, the house of a *houngan*, but in such a settlement the *houngan* is not only the spiritual leader of his people; as the wealthiest citizen in his community he could afford the extra paint, and decoration would set his home apart from the others.

Jérémie, sometimes called the "City of Poets," lies almost at the tip of the 150-mile long southern peninsula. Its sway-backed, spidery houses of pastel pink and green rising from the very water's edge to the towering mountains, directly behind, are one of the eeriest visions in a land of seeming improbabilities. It is virtually inaccessible by road. The *caille* with the botanical abstractions lay along the inland trail from Jérémie to Anse d'Hainault, a trail



Painted Grave Cross: Furcy



Native Wall-Paintings: Boisilmé, Jérémie, Jacmel

from which it is possible at times to see eastward as many as seven consecutive mountain ranges, each presumably with a valley as incredibly lush and overpopulated as this one. Clearly the painting on the left, very precise in greens and reds, symbolizes a floral offering, though the head and horns of a bull might be suggested too. The lower half of the more interesting pictograph on the right is probably an adaptation of the crossed sword handles occurring in *vodun* flour-drawing. Whether the upper portion represents the three palms of the Haitian seal, or the Trinity, or was just added for *élan* is anybody's guess.

For pure abstraction consider the *caille* near Jacmel, with the two youngsters squatting in front of it. The dots and circles were predominantly yellow and blue; the solid centers, red. The woman who claimed to have painted them claimed also to have had no particular purpose in mind: "*L'imagination —c'est tout!*" Yet such a lavish display on a single hut (even the interior walls had their murals) is very rare, and the character of the designs themselves is closely analogous to the snake-mottlings with which the *houngan* invariably dabs the central column of his temple.

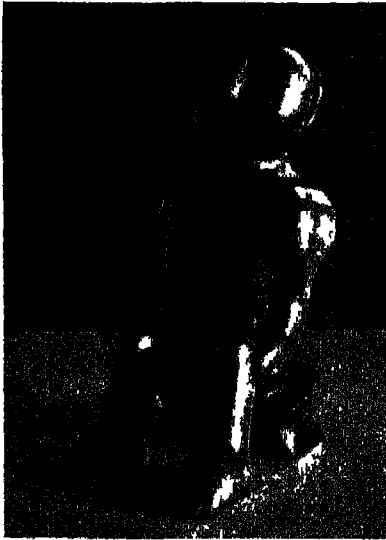
Sculpture, Music, the Dance

Considering the primacy of sculpture among the arts of Africa, and its perfection there, Herskovits was justified in looking for evidence of it among a people whose antecedents are African, and in lamenting its disappearance. Yet where occasionally stone- and wood-carving does reappear, the pattern is startlingly African. I saw a kind of cigar-store Indian in one of the shops of Miragôane. It had no legs, the body was a stump and the arms were hinged paddles; yet the head, not more than two inches thick at any point, was

shaped like an egg, and the features were treated entirely as concavities, only the lids of the oval eyes protruding. Resemblance to the flat Ashanti figures of the Gold Coast was unmistakable.

Thirty miles closer to the capital along the south coast of the central bay, in Léogane, lives an *ébéniste*, or worker in mahogany, named Simpre. He can carve book-ends which, if they were a little more slick, would delight a Grand Rapids housewife. But occasionally, in the same Port-au-Prince carpentry shop where these are to be found will appear a single figure, usually seated, which Simpre has apparently carved for his own pleasure. Priced at two dollars, or less, it does not sell. It has as much of the vaunted African three-dimensionality as any sculpture carved beyond the homeland.

Whether a school of primitive sculptors will be found in Haiti to rival the



Sculpture in Mahogany by Simpre

new painters is a question. Every six months or so, a traveler comes down from the remote mountains with an amazing stone bird or stylized iguana in his *macoute* but it always seems to be an isolated achievement. So far, only Odilon Duperier, now a student of Jason Seley, has consistently produced original work. His "Adam and Eve" being tempted by the serpent under a veritable jungle of intricately carved trees, appears to be spontaneous. And surprisingly, the trees don't overbalance the figures. But if not actually baroque, this carving is certainly not pure sculpture in the Greek or African sense, or even in the sense of the blunt idiom of Simpre.

Odilon Duperrier
at Work



In 1938, Herskovits was equally justified in considering music and the dance as the Haitian arts par excellence. If there is a Haitian peasant who can't play a drum or a flute, he must be living in complete isolation and misery. The average Haitian, from the time he can walk until he dies, dances a good part of every night—or so it seems. There is dancing at religious ceremonies, dancing in the streets and just dancing. Every other day is a “festival” requiring celebration. Haitian dancing, however, is rather crude and perfunctory by Western standards, except when considered as part of the *vodun* ritual; even then it never assumes individuality or importance for its own sake.

Haitian music, on the other hand, though it may seem crude and perfunctory to the jaded traveler, frequently isn't. Songs, simple and complex, are improvised for everything from splitting a coconut or beating the laundry with a club in the riverbed, or fishing for red snapper, to cutting cane, or overthrowing a President. The *coumbite*—a cooperative imported straight

from West Africa, and organized in any locality where a peasant has more *piti m* to harvest, charcoal-wood to cut, rocks to remove, or irrigation ditches to dig than he can cope with unassisted—invariably has its drummer and its songs. Many of the songs lampoon the promiscuous wife, the gambling husband or the stay-at-home—and effectively. For Haiti, as Courlander rightly points out, is a civilization built on work, and the word *vagabond* is the most insulting that can be leveled at a man of the hills. The inescapable “Geemee fi’ cen’s” of the capital is a greeting unknown in Trouin or Fonds de Nèg’.

As for the instruments and the manner of playing these songs, they are almost wholly African. A battery of “Rada” drums, hollowed from logs and tapering away from the cowhide membrane, consists of the bass drum, or *maman*, played with one hand and a mallet; the *seconde*, generally played with two hands, and the smallest, the *bula*, with two sticks. Players of these instruments, with sometimes an *ogantier* who beats on a piece of metal, and a woman who shakes a small gourd filled with seeds, comprise the “orchestra” at most *vodun* ceremonies. Where the *loa* (or gods) belong to the “Pétro” cycle, Pétro drums are used, drums on which the hide is stretched by exterior lacing rather than pegs. Nowhere in the world, not even in Africa itself, are drums played with greater skill.

At Mardi Gras festivals and *bamboches* (dances) the music is supplied by “Congo” and other musical groups. On these occasions the *vaccine*, a hollow bamboo stalk from two to five feet in length, predominates. *Vaccines* are sometimes gaily painted, and their single low note, blending well with the flat Pétro-type tambour also used on such occasions, reverberates through the hills like the cry of some prehistoric owl. I had thought the *vaccine* native



Wash Day Singer



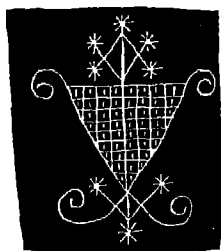
Congo Society 'Ti Roro; Ciceron's 'Rada Trio; Piston Players· Morne L'Hôpital

to Haiti until I read Gide's description of a Dakpas circumcision dance in *Travels in the Congo*: "They danced gravely in Indian file, to the sound of twenty-three earthen or wooden trumpets of unequal length (about one to four feet long) which can each make only a single note."

Other interesting native instruments are the conch shell, capable of emitting a range of penetrating notes; the *piston*, a simple papaya stem, on which some mountaineers can produce the full register of a bugle with every bit as much brass; and the mosquito drum, consisting of a taut wire plucked over a half-buried iron pot.

In Cap-Haïtien quite a few people play Spanish (Dominican) guitars. And sometimes in that curiously Spanish city one has the impression that *everybody* is taking piano lessons—from the same 19th century drawing-room master.

PHILOMÉ OBIN: A POPULAR REALIST



"The arts have no chance in poor countries. . . ."

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL

Even a Haitian has trouble defining the psychological barrier that separates a man of the "North" from a man of the "South." The differences are subtle. But they are as real, as historical, and no doubt as economic, as the difference between a Welshman and a Scot, or a New England puritan and a Tennessee hillbilly.

The South, a loose geographical expression that includes not only the rugged southern peninsula (virtually "unexplored" save in the environs of Jacmel, Aux Cayes and Jérémie) but also the rich coastal plains that surround Léogane and Port-au-Prince, is traditionally "African," self-possessed, easy-going, exuberantly religious, caste-conscious and submissive. Relatively undeveloped by the French, this part of Haiti escaped the libertarian fury of the insurrection, becoming instead a refuge for mulatto separatism and diversionary English intrigue. To this day it remains unscorched by the winds of politics. It remains also a sanctuary of *vodun* unalloyed.

In the same colloquial sense, the North may be said to comprise not only Cap-Haïtien, the capital of colonial days with its fabulous adjoining Plaine du Nord, but also the Artibonite valley, the barren Môle St. Nicholas peninsula, and the mountainous region that surrounds the central plateau near Hinche, from Christophe's Citadel overlooking both Cap-Haitien and the

Atlantic to Lascahobas in that eastern part of the country once belonging to the King of Spain. The North seems at once more ancient and more contemporary than the South. The crumbling ruins of colonial grandeur are everywhere. The land, for the most part, is poorer than in the South, and where it isn't poor, large-scale cultivation of sugar, sisal and rubber give a visual impression of emptiness, with the result that the sense of swarming activity one so often has in the South is here almost wholly absent. Fort-Liberté, Port-de-Paix and Hinche are almost ghost-towns; and in comparison to Port-au-Prince, Cap-Haitien seems half asleep. Yet this is the part of the country from which all rebellions have sprung, in which all resistance to oppression has smoldered, where even today the eye of the exceptional man looks outward toward the aggressive West rather than inward to the security of ancestral conventions. And the Spaniard, with his fiercely held beliefs, his political inconstancy and his flair for the theatrical has left a faint but unmistakable imprint on the face of this land.

Man of the North

Until Philomé Obin came along, no man in any of the arts had had the interest, or the capacity, or the eccentric ambition to express these things about the North that everybody knew. As elsewhere in Haiti, the educated class was busying itself trying to be as un-Haitian, as unlocal, as unnatural as possible. Obin from the outset of his career as a painter saw everything in the North exactly as it was. The slightly moth-eaten mountains behind the Cape. The glaring sun in the streets. The ruins. The respectable coffee-colored Capois (in which category, though very dark, he included himself). The arcades and the tall Spanish doors, heavy enough to keep out a company of sappers. The bearded revolutionaries with flashing black eyes returning from the hills on their white horses. The prim Catholic convents. The grotesque masqueraders at Mardi Gras. The bourgeois convention. The military parade. The official welcome.

For thirty years, off and on, whenever the consuming business of making a living eased up a little, Obin had painted these things because it pleased him to do so. His fellow citizens saw what he was doing, and what they saw they didn't like. What was this drab world with its irritating air of familiarity? Who were these crude people, staring neither to right nor to left, but with every button buttoned? This wasn't painting. Painting was gondolas in the moonlight. Or lovers in the rose arbor. Or the fountains of Pauline Buona-



Roosevelt's Intercession by Obin

parte Leclerc. Or perhaps King Henry Christophe riding up to Sans Souci on an imperial charger.

One day in November, 1944, the driver of a dusty *camion* pulled up in front of the Centre d'Art in Port-au-Prince with a neatly tied brown-paper package under his arm. It was addressed to DeWitt Peters. Peters, who had never seen a Haitian popular painting, looked at the contents with some perplexity. On a piece of cardboard there was depicted in considerable detail the arrival of Franklin Delano Roosevelt at Cap-Haïtien in 1934 to lift the nineteen-year occupation of Haiti by the American Marines. Lest there be any doubt about the matter, the caption, carefully lettered and prominently placed, said so. The picture (Plate 4) was fairly crude and the colors (it had apparently been painted with furniture enamel) were on the dull side. But the authenticity of the scene and its forthright style were impressive. Peters wrote a note to the artist asking whether he might buy the picture, enclosed a sum of money and signified his hope of seeing more.

The following spring the *camion* driver returned with two smaller and more striking pictures. One, inscribed as a tribute to the Centre d'Art, contained a hand—the fingers, fingernails, and enclosing cuff meticulously painted—clasping a bouquet of assorted flowers. The other, in which a tiny sheeted figure in the lower right corner was rising from the grave while angels de-

scended from the sky bearing scrolls and still higher the eye of God peered out between two clouds, was entitled, no doubt as a further delicate tribute to the generous American in the capital, "Franklin D. Roosevelt Interceding in the Beyond for the Union of the Americas." Obin, who had never before sold a picture for more than a dollar or received praise from anyone but his boyhood drawing-master, was then and there put on a monthly salary and invited to organize his own branch of the Centre d'Art in the North. In his letter of acknowledgment to Peters, the artist gave characteristic expression to his understanding of the meaning of art:

Cap-Haitien, March 16, 1945

Monsieur le directeur,

Your letter of the 5th which enclosed a check to my order has been received. My thanks.

That I did not reply immediately is due to lack of time; I am always hard at work preparing new canvases.

The greatest satisfaction I have today is knowing that my country, "Haiti," has found someone as devoted, courageous and tenacious as you to make people understand the possibilities of painting, the need for it, and that it is not an ordinary thing.

As I see it, painting should be considered in part like the Holy Book, in this way: by means of painting, that is, a picture, one is able to learn something about the past in every part of the world, one can get an idea of a foreign country, and with paint one can leave documents for future generations that writing alone would not provide.

If, for a long time, I wasn't practicing painting as it should be practiced it is because I had never received encouragement.

In spite of everything, I love this art.

Philomé Obin

In 1908, when Philomé Obin was seventeen, he painted his first picture, an aquarelle of a young Haitian hunting. His drawing-master at the Lycée, a local academician by the name of Berthold, took one look at it, Obin says, and announced that the boy was a natural master to whom he could teach nothing. If the story is not apocryphal, it indicates surprising acumen on Berthold's part and almost the only encouragement the artist was to receive for thirty-six years.

Obin's father was a tailor in the town of Limbé, not far from the Cape;



с(а). PHILOVIL OVIN. The Funeral of Charlemagne Péralké

and Philomé was born there, one of seven children. The family moved to the provincial capital when he was very young but of his early years there he remembers, or cares to recall, very little. His first significant recollection is of the year 1914 when he was working in the city's finance department as a clerk. The revolution against President Zamor had just succeeded, and the revolutionists, apparently mistaking Obin for somebody else, threatened to shoot him; a few weeks later he was actually jailed as a suspected sympathizer with the discredited regime, but only, he insists, because of an inadvertent failure to observe the nine o'clock curfew. After vehemently protesting his neutrality, he was released.

Four years later, with apparently as little emotional involvement, Obin observed the comings and goings of the *Cacos* guerrillas and their final defeat by the American Marines. Doubtless he heard how the *Cacos*, armed with machetes and obsolete French 45-70s from which captured Marine 30-06 slugs fairly dribbled, were mowed down in Marmelade and Hinche after their hideouts had been spotted by Curtiss scout-planes. And certainly he must have known about the betrayal of the guerrilla chieftain, Charlemagne Peralte, at Petite Rivière de l'Artibonite and how the American invaders crucified him naked to the door of their headquarters as an example to those who had not joined the resistance.

This was the year, however, of other matters more immediately absorbing to Philomé Obin. It was the year in which he made his only trip outside of Haiti, to Monte Cristi across the northeast coastal border, to collect his half of a Dominican lottery ticket worth \$500. It was on this trip that Obin met and married his first wife, the mother of his only daughter. And it was this year, too, that he became a Mason, and began to develop that distaste for the worship of images which led him later on to abandon Catholicism for the Baptist Church.

In 1923 his wife died and Obin quit his \$8-a-month job in the Finance Department. For the next twenty years he was to make a precarious living in a dozen unsatisfactory occupations from cutting hair to purchasing and selling coffee in small lots. By 1942, when he found sporadic employment as a \$1.40-a-day paymaster at the Dauphin sisal plantation, Obin looked back on his life as a failure in almost every respect. A second marriage, to a shopkeeper of Ouanaminthe, in 1925, had terminated in separation four years later. Two sons by this marriage lived with their mother, and only Télémaque, a natural son born in 1924, showed any interest in painting. As a matter of fact, Obin himself in these twenty years had produced no more

than a dozen pictures. In 1938 the Masonic Lodge at Limonade paid him six dollars for a group of heraldic panels and in the same year dispatch of a flattering allegorical canvas to President Sténio Vincent had resulted in nothing more substantial than a formal note of thanks. In 1943, Obin painted several semi-religious pictures for Masonic Lodge No. 6 at the Cape. And in 1944 he sent President Élie Lescot a painting of Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin—a gift which this time was not even acknowledged. When later the same year the artist shifted his waning hope in the direction of the newly organized Centre d'Art he fortified himself by writing on his blackboard, "Dear God, the year 1944 was a bad one for Philomé Obin. Please try and make the year 1945 a better one for him."

The Artist and His School

Obin, after the three years of his vindication and of his coming-of-age as a painter, looks everything that one would expect him to look except his age. He could as easily be thirty-seven as fifty-seven. His face is sensitive, ascetic. He weighs hardly more than 100 pounds. His small feet, bony, long-fingered hands and taper-thin wrists contribute to a somewhat bird-like appearance. His spotless white shirt and suit are in keeping with his passion for order.

So is the décor of the very simple one-room shack in which he lives and paints. Behind more imposing dwellings out by the gate leading to the Plaine du Nord and Sans Souci, it is put together of an assortment of old crates, cylinder blocks, and boards bearing such legends as "Engine Soap" and "Hazelhurst and Sons Ltd., London." It contains a cot, an *armoire*, two chairs and a table. The walls are papered with Chesterfield cigarette ads and faded copies of *La Guerre Illustrée*: planes, Sherman tanks in echelon, and rows of crosses with the caption "*Le Prix de la Victoire*." On the table stands a bizarre triumphal arch constructed entirely of matchboxes, each "drawer" containing a single treasured object—a collar button, a safety pin, a feather, a smooth stone. Refreshments, in the form of a sweet liqueur in tiny glasses, are served to the artist's guests by a black hand which passes a tray through a slot in the wall leading to an adjoining stable. On the cot is a fine pencil draft of the artist's next picture, a melancholy but lovely girl seated on a rock: she appeared to Obin in a dream the night before, giving him a message which is too intimate to reveal. The blackboard now bears the motto: *No. 14: Que*



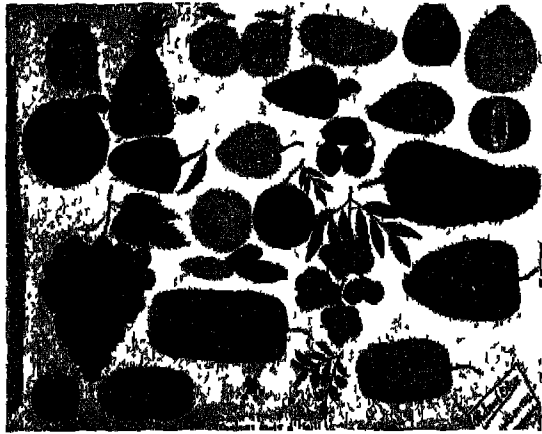
Philomé Obin

1948 soit pour moi une année de reconnaissance et de remerciement à Jésus mon Sauveur."

Obin's "school," the *Branche Capoise* of the Centre d'Art, is similarly neat. After an exhibition party, the caps of the Coca-Cola bottles are gathered, cleaned and arranged in squares; next morning each cap will contain a par-



Obin and Pupils, DeWitt Peters and Mme. Schomburg



The Fruits of Haiti by Obin

ticular color of Sapolin for the master's pupils, who arrive to paint as soon as their other studies or occupations permit. When Philomé himself is painting at home, the students may be supervised by such extremely talented apprentices as Richard, St.-Vil, or the artist's brother, Sèneque Obin. It has been remarked that all of Obin's pupils tend to paint like Obin, yet Richard has an engaging shorthand, St.-Vil a dreamlike lyricism, and Sèneque Obin a fierce imagination that give their work individuality.

Popular Realism

The genesis of Philomé Obin's style is not hard to trace. The only predecessor whose canvases he professes to admire, and perhaps the only oil paintings he had ever seen before visiting Port-au-Prince for the first time in 1946, are the work of a fellow-citizen of the Cape named Teissier, who flourished shortly before Obin's birth. One of Teissier's canvases, dated 1886, hangs in Masonic Lodge No. 6. It is entitled "*La Parfaite Harmonie* No. 4." The greater part of the picture is devoted to ladders bearing the names and dates of *Chefs de Chapitre* from 1854 to the present. But the upper portion is embellished with some very competently drafted emblematic crowns, crossed staves, a double eagle, a skull, a torch and a book bearing the legend "DEPOSIT POTENTES DECEDES ET EXALTAVIT HUMILES." Here, no doubt, Obin acquired the formal symbolism of such a picture as "The Apotheosis of F. D. Roosevelt" and also, perhaps, his very effective manner of arranging "The Fruits of Haiti" like so many gules and lions on an armorial shield.

The less derivative elements of Obin's style may be attributed to his personal characteristics—his piety, his respectability, his orderliness, his patriotism, his detachment—and to his admitted ambition to leave behind him a documentary record of the appearance and principal historic events of Haiti (and in particular of the North of Haiti) in the first half of the 19th century.

To an astonishing degree Obin has accomplished this objective already. A comparative glance at "The Orphanage at Bolosse" (Plate 6), "Gontran Rouzier, Prisoner" (Plate 7), "The Cacos of Leconte" (Colorplate C) and "The Funeral of Charlemagne Peralte" (Plate Ca), and the adjoining snapshots of the actual scenes at which these pictures were painted, will reveal Obin's genius for accurately recording what confronts him while at the same time elevating it, by simplification, concentration and unconscious distortion to the plane of a work of art. The effect of timelessness and alienation is achieved in the first picture by placing the groups of tiny figures against geometrical patterns in a jungle. Obin chooses the political subject of the second picture as a true man of the North, but he treats it in his characteristic manner: with precision and impartiality, under the benign (and evenly spaced) stars. Both the "Cacos" and the "Funeral" derive their impact from the same kind of rhythmic massing of figures and rigidity of expression that characterizes Persian and Abyssinian, or early 15th century Italian painting.

Quite as characteristic and consistent is Obin's treatment of more homely themes. His "Dance at the Home of Fédermé Valcourt" (Plate 8), with its vertically massed couples contrasted with horizontal floor and ceiling boards, the whole scene illuminated by a single glaring electric-light bulb on a cord in the center, has all of the super-realism of a Van Gogh. The celebrated Mardi Gras pictures, on the other hand, suggest the early Chirico. In one, a weird perspective of towering red doors sets off two enormous gorillas lightly embracing beside an impassive "human" goat in bright yellow. In another (Plate 5) an enormously inflated and faceless woman is flanked by a peasant with a machete, and by a detached bourgeois. Obin, as might be expected, takes no stock in *vodun* and when he paints *vodun* scenes, manages to give them all the dressed-up respectability of a convention of Elks.

How much of this artist's power derives from quantitative delineation it is hard to say. When Obin paints a grape arbor or a wire fence there are literally thousands of individual grapes and separate wires. His picture of the athletic exercises of the militia in the Place St. Victoire, though it is only eighteen inches by twenty-four, contains 491 figures, thirteen cars and two tables. Yet the predominating impression is of emptiness. The great "Funeral



The Orphanage at Bolosse



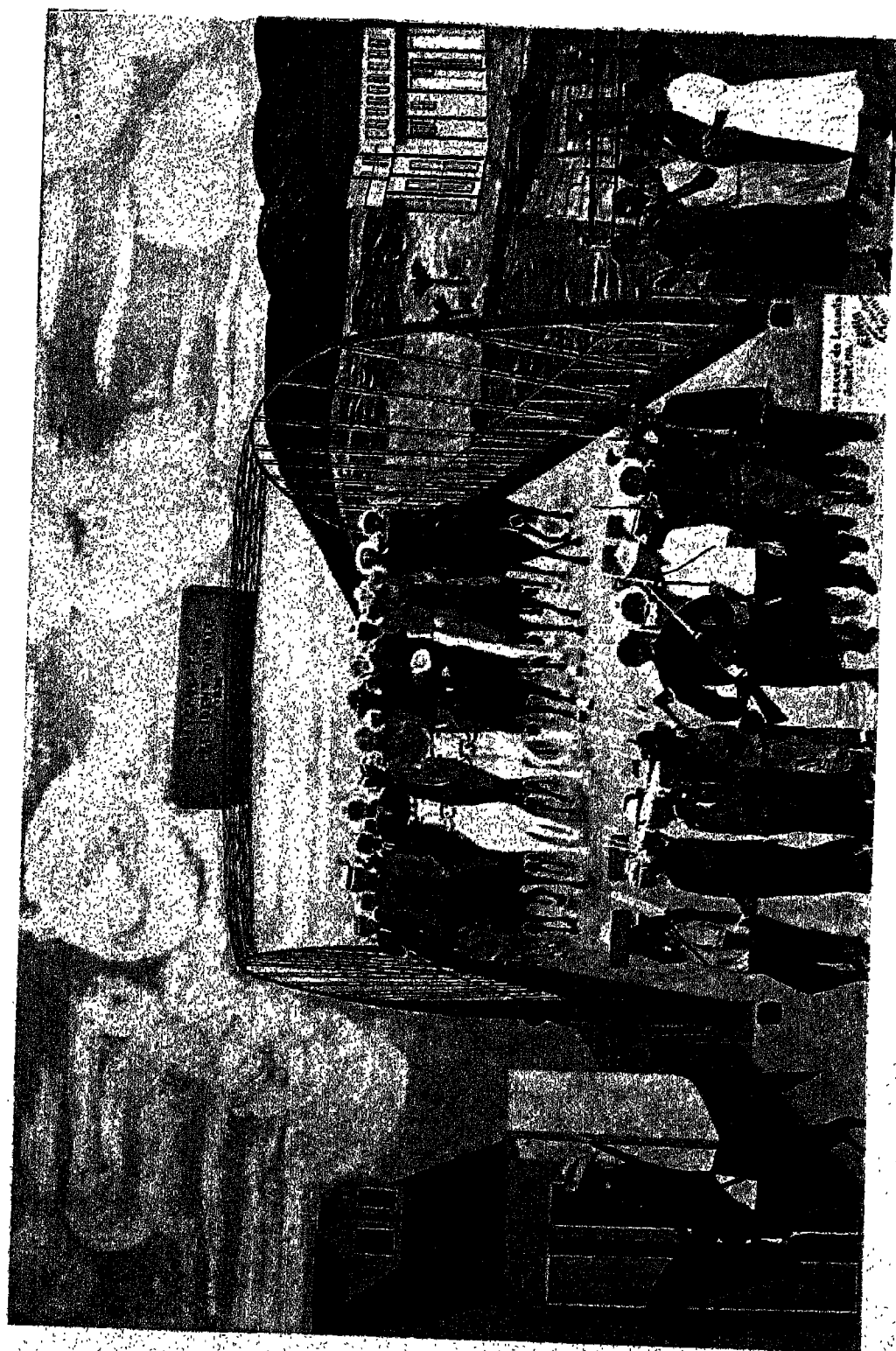
The President Hyppolite Bridge, Cap-Haitien



National Prison, Port-au-Prince



Street, Cap Haitien



C. PHILOMÉ OBIN: *The Cacos of Leconte*

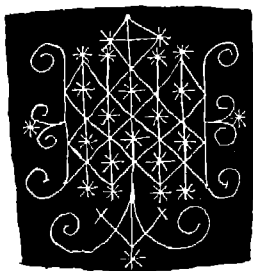
of Charlemagne Péralte" (Plate Ca), Obin's masterpiece to date, contains no less than 740 figures and manages to look quite as deserted. He worked on it, he says, six hours a day for forty-five days.

Obin, after some urging, conducted Peters and the author to the grave of Péralte, the guerrilla leader, in the cemetery back of the Cape. We read the understandably bitter inscription:

*Mort à trente-trois ans, trahi comme le Maître,
Exposé nu sous son drapeau crucifié;
Comme il avait, un jour, osé nous le promettre,
Pour le Pays il s'était fait sacrificateur
Face à l'Américain lui seul a crié halte:
Decouvrez-vous devant Charlemagne Péralte!*

We deplored the folly of imperialism and the callousness of our fellow-countrymen. The gentle Obin replied that Americans had always treated him with courtesy and generosity. Was he being tactful, or had we been reading a suppressed emotion of our own into the "Funeral," with its solemn procession of mourners? Who could say? Only of this we were sure: that Philomé Obin had expressed in art the spirit of his time and place as it is given to few men to do, that he had kept his promise.

WHITE POLITICS AND BLACK MAGIC



"Out of Africa comes always something new"

SCIPIO AFRICANUS

Racism in Haiti, the complex of imagined inferiority (or superiority) based on gradations of skin color, dates back to the French planters. The liberal *code noir* of Louis XIV, which had ensured full citizenship to freedmen, began to be abrogated about the middle of the 18th century when the white colonists realized that they would soon be outnumbered by the increasingly prosperous *gens de couleur*. The mulattoes already controlled the rich parish of Jérémie and were beginning to send their children to Paris to be educated. First, arms were denied them; next, the holding of responsible office and the entering of certain professions was prohibited; finally, laws governing the mulattoes' dress, freedom of movement and seating in public places, were passed. Admixture of Negro blood down to a sixteenth part became defined by statute. Little wonder that the mulattoes were the first to try to turn the "Rights of Man" to their account—or that they fought hard in the early days of the revolution to protect their precarious status against the propertyless black slaves.

Yet racism was the one major problem in Haiti that looked as if it could be solved when the American Marines landed at Port-au-Prince in 1915. Between 1844 and that date, three presidents of light skin-color had ruled for a scattered eleven years; considering the country's overwhelmingly dark-

skinned population, eleven years seems fair enough, even if one should give considerable weight to the fact that the mulatto minority continued to dominate trade.

The Marines brought with them race prejudice in its most virulent form. The first regiment to land had been recruited entirely from the South of the United States—on the theory, it was said, that southern soldiers would “know how to handle” Negroes. This blunder was rectified quickly, but not before fearful resentment had been fanned; nor is there much evidence that successive Marine replacements were closer to being ambassadors of racial good will than the average American G. I. in World War II.

The peasant, of course, was as little affected by the Occupation as he had been by any of the displacements and replacements among the oligarchs in the capital since the time of Dessalines. If anything, he benefited.¹ The economy, which had always been unpredictable, and which under the seven presidents disposed of by violence between 1908 and 1915 was little less than anarchic, suddenly became stable. Public building and road work took place for the first time since the relatively efficient administration of President Hyppolite (1889-96). Hospitals, clinics and sewage systems were introduced. Social prejudice meant nothing to a man with no social status or pretensions; a *gros blanc* had as little power to insult him as a *gros nèg*.

In Port-au-Prince it was different. It is hardly surprising that the Marines, who had entered the country one jump ahead of the Imperial German Navy but had as a secondary objective the “protection” and ultimate absorption of foreign investments, should turn to the business element for support. Of the five presidents to rule from 1915 to 1946, the first two were little more than Marine puppets, and all were light-skinned members of that *élite* that had not really tasted political power since the time of Boyer. These presidents, for their part, filled the important offices of Haiti with mulatto appointees. And the huge standing army of the past was reduced to a policing constabulary of 2,000 men, officered in the beginning by the Marines themselves, and later by mulattoes or by blacks the mulattoes could depend on.

To say that the *élite* was any less anxious to get rid of the Marines than educated men and patriots of darker skin color, would not be true. From the time of the *Cacos* to the final negotiations between Presidents Vincent and Roosevelt in 1934, the interest of every Haitian with pride in the 150-year

¹ Only when the Marines made the mistake of impressing him into forced labor on the roads, did the peasant rebel. It was this policy which led to the guerrilla uprising of the *Cacos* in 1918-19.

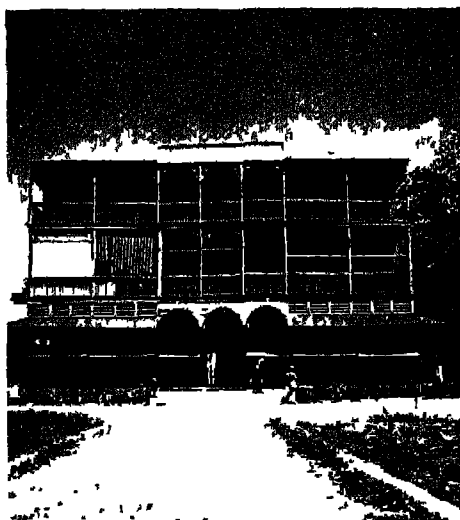


Élite Villa, Port-au-Prince

independence of his country had become increasingly vocal. The mulatto's pride had been doubly hurt. With a small but socially snobbish white colony now firmly entrenched in the country, and permitted for the first time since Dessalines' day to own land, the mulatto found himself socially outranked. Moreover he, of all Haitians, had the greatest interest in transferring nominal political power into actual economic domination. American race prejudice, like French colonial prejudice in the 18th century, had fortified in him two conflicting attitudes: an exaggerated fear of "American imperialism" and an unnatural loathing for the barbarity of the "animal" peasant.

There were exceptions, of course. And it is to these exceptions that credit must go for moral support of the Haitian "renaissance" of the forties. But it cannot be overlooked that on the one hand the typical Haitian bourgeois was too provincial to react to other cultures except in terms of the simplest adoption (French) and rejection (American) formulae; or that on the other, an abyss yawned, and still yawns, between him and the enriching traditions of his own people.

As always, the homes men build for themselves provide a clue to their aspirations. The typical house of a typical urban aristocrat may be described by the words oddity, instability, gentility. Nothing is functional. Nothing, of course, suggests Africa. Roofs of corrugated tin are supported by plaster or wooden sheathing crisscrossed by Tudor half-timbers, or by spidery col-



Hotel Bellevue, Port-au-Prince

umns that look as though they could support *nothing*. There is a profusion of miniscule minarets with shutters that do not open. Around the eaves and cornices the jigsaw man has been allowed to go crazy.

It is said that native architects imported the style from the Paris Colonial Exposition of 1900, where in turn it had been borrowed from Indo-China and the French East Indies. Certainly the once elegant Hotel Bellevue has an East-Indian air about it. But the characteristic private mansion could more easily have evolved from close observation of the Victorian cuckoo clock.

It is weird with its pastel coloring; and rather wonderful; and wholly superior, at least aesthetically, to the vulgar fortresses of limestone and black cement now squatting (under American inspiration) from Pacot to Pétionville.

Gentility is also the word for the related tastes of the *grand bourgeois*. The wife, almost as home-ridden as a member of an Ottoman harem, serves English tea and reads light French novels. The husband, in the circle of his business and political friends, dilates upon continental art (of the style of Bouguereau or the Beaux Arts) and denounces American Imperialism (in terms of the era of Theodore Roosevelt and dollar diplomacy). His children attend a parochial school with other children of the same caste. His attitude toward the Centre d'Art may be properly compared with the attitude of a suburban New York stock-broker toward the Museum of Modern Art. He is as much



Philippe Thoby-Marcelin at Fort-Liberté

offended by the primitive as by the sophisticated, and attends an occasional diplomatic exhibition of academic work at the Centre only because it has been announced that the wife of the President will attend or because he is a little uneasy about the publicity the popular painters have been receiving in some of the more fashionable periodicals *étrangères*.

The miracle is that out of this atmosphere in the twenties and thirties rose the few courageous nonconformist intellectuals who made possible the political and cultural revolution of the forties. In 1928, Dr. Price-Mars, the eminent ethnologist, who was later to become the first dark-skinned foreign minister in three decades, published his classic study of Afro-Haitian folklore, *Ainsi Parla l'Oncle*. Even before that date, Émile Roumère in Jérémie, had begun to write the first of his brilliant poems in creole, the despised but rich patois of the peasant. In the thirties came J. C. Dorsainvil and Louis Maximilien with the first objective and sympathetic studies of *vodun*. In the early forties, the socially conscious fiction of Jacques Roumain (who founded the Bureau d'Ethnologie in Port-au-Prince) and of the brothers Pierre Marcelin and Philippe Thoby-Marcelin, laid the groundwork for an indigenous Haitian literature. Intellectuals like Carl Brouard and Antonio Vieux, poets like Jean Brierre, began to reorient Haitian nationalism along African rather than provincial French lines. And it is significant that all of them, save Price-Mars and Vieux were mulattoes who had shaken off provincialisms abroad.

But the political phase of change invariably limps behind intellectual fer-

ment. In Haiti, institutions can hardly be said to have altered in any fundamental way. The revolution of January, 1946, like most Haitian revolutions, began in the Champ de Mars of Port-au-Prince and ended in the presidential palace, yet it did reflect in several aspects the deeper stirring.

Its spark, for one thing, was struck in the schools. For another, it went beyond disgust with the nepotism of *Élie Lescot* and the corruption of his ministers. The peasant women who helped tear down the house of *Gontran Rouzier*, Lescot's detested Minister of the Interior, by removing the roof-nails with their teeth, did so to shouts of "Down with the Mulatto Capitalists!"

The Communists, as might be suspected from this slogan, had a part in the events of January, but their candidate, *Figiolé*, came out a poor third in the following May election. It was significant enough that the four ranking candidates (including even General *Calixte*, who is said also to have promised his peasant supporters to bring back the Marines!) ran on platforms guaranteeing a "black" Haiti.

Dumarsais Estimé, the winning candidate and present president, came into office following an interim period during which a triumvirate of officers of the *Garde d'Haiti* had ruled the country in the wake of Lescot's flight to Canada. A successful career in the banana business in the *Artibonite* valley,



Revolution of January 1946, Champ de Mars



Crise de Possession: Guédé

as well as administrative experience as Minister of Education under Vincent, undoubtedly tended to make Estimé acceptable to the officers; yet he would never have been elevated from relative obscurity had he not combined with these qualifications the fortuitous one of being dark-skinned. The popular song of the post-campaign period ran:

*Oraison Estimé pou'm meté la caille moin,
Pou'm sémenté sept fois
Pou'm pas travaillé à bou'geois pou' gran' méci!*

(Estimé's advice I'll hang in my house;
I'll swear seven times
Never to work for the élite for nothing!)

How far in this leftward direction the revolution of 1946 has actually progressed is another question. Estimé achieved widespread popularity by paying off the six-and-one-half million dollar debt to the United States, thus removing the final symbol of the hated Occupation, an American fiscal agent charged with overseeing interest payments. But the liquidation of such a sum, in a country whose total annual budget is less than ten million dollars and whose imports almost invariably exceed its exports, was not without dangerous consequences. Four millions in government reserves, hitherto allocated for National Guard retirement pay and insurance, had to be appropriated, and the additional one-and-a-half millions had to be borrowed. And by March, 1949, perhaps in consequence, less than fifty thousand of the promised one-and-a-half million dollar public-works program had been spent.

In terms of the cultural renaissance that preceded and accompanied the new regime, one minor change of attitude may not have been without major significance. Under the mulatto presidents, *vodun* had been frowned on if not actually proscribed. President Borno is said to have instructed the palace guard to keep even Mardi Gras celebrants at a distance until one day an irrepressible *houngan*, under the spell of the *loa* of the cemetery and attired in that god's characteristic regalia, actually forced the dignified ruler to come out on the Champ de Mars and pay off his serenaders. The song is still sung:

Papa Guédé bel ga'çon!
Guédé Nimbo bel ga'çon!
L'habillé-l' tout en blanc
Pou l'al monté au Palais!

From this period dates the story of the peasant imprisoned by the Marines for a minor offense. The *mystères* had foretold that promptly at noon on a certain Friday, the unjustly punished would turn into a dog and escape. A huge crowd assembled in front of the prison. The church bell struck twelve. And, sure enough, between the very legs of the sergeant on guard a small *chien* trotted out of the building. The crowd, thoroughly satisfied, melted away.

President Vincent was too preoccupied with liquidating the Occupation, and with covering up the tragic scandal of Dominican Dictator Trujillo's massacre of thousands of Haitian cane-cutters at Dajabon, to pay much at-



Papa Guédé by Cédor

tention to *vodun*. President Lescot added to his unpopularity by allowing the Catholic priests to destroy ceremonial objects and by banning the use of drums on weekday nights.

President Estimé, in contrast, though he is himself a Catholic, has been sympathetic to the people's religion. Of peasant stock, he has lived close enough to the priests of both faiths in his native Verrettes to acquire perspective. He has asserted that as long as he remains in office there will be no persecution, open or covert, of any sect. And he has promised as well that his government intends not only to continue its far-sighted support of the Centre d'Art but to give the popular painters an opportunity to decorate public buildings with religious murals.

Catholicism and Vodun

Just as the political course of present-day Haiti may be traced in some degree to such external factors as the Russian Revolution and the American Good Neighbor Policy, so the cultural reorientation that preceded it may just as legitimately be said to have stemmed from the world-wide interest in the primitive that began with the studies of Frobenius and Frazer at the turn of the century and culminated in the psychoanalytic interpretation of religion under Freud and Jung a decade or two later.

The anti-clericalism that played so large a part in the Mexican renaissance, with its emphasis on primitive Indian culture, was not wholly absent in modern Haiti's rediscovery of Africa. Though the Catholic priests of Haiti today have learned by bitter experience not to attack *vodun* frontally, it was not always so. From the time of Sir Spenser St. John,¹ whose fantastic charges of ritual murder and cannibalism "aroused" the "civilized" world of 1884, to the three-weeks' visit in 1912 of Stephen Bonsal,² harbinger of American occupation, the priests had capitalized on every irregularity or sensational account of the peasants' religion. Bonsal, after detailing a particularly lurid account of a ceremony at which a child was tortured and eaten, added

¹ *Haiti, or the Black Republic* (London, 1884). Sir Spenser, who had his information about cannibalistic Pétro ceremonies from an unnamed party, was solidly supported by that great scientific historian, Froude, on the grounds that the Haitians "cry out against it [the charge] with a degree of anger which is the surest evidence of its truth."

² *The American Mediterranean* (New York, 1912).

revealingly enough: "So I never saw the dark frenzy of the African rites . . . and I believe that today there is only one white man in Haiti, a French priest, who has seen the Voodoo rites carried out to their ghastly conclusion . . . excuse enough for the interference of the civilized world to save the people of the Black Republic from the further degradation that awaits them."

Fortunately, the benighted peoples of the Black Republic had to wait little more than two decades for calm and thoroughly documented appraisals both of Haitian *vodun*, and of its origins in the homeland. And happily, too, both studies came from the pen of a foreigner—and an American.¹

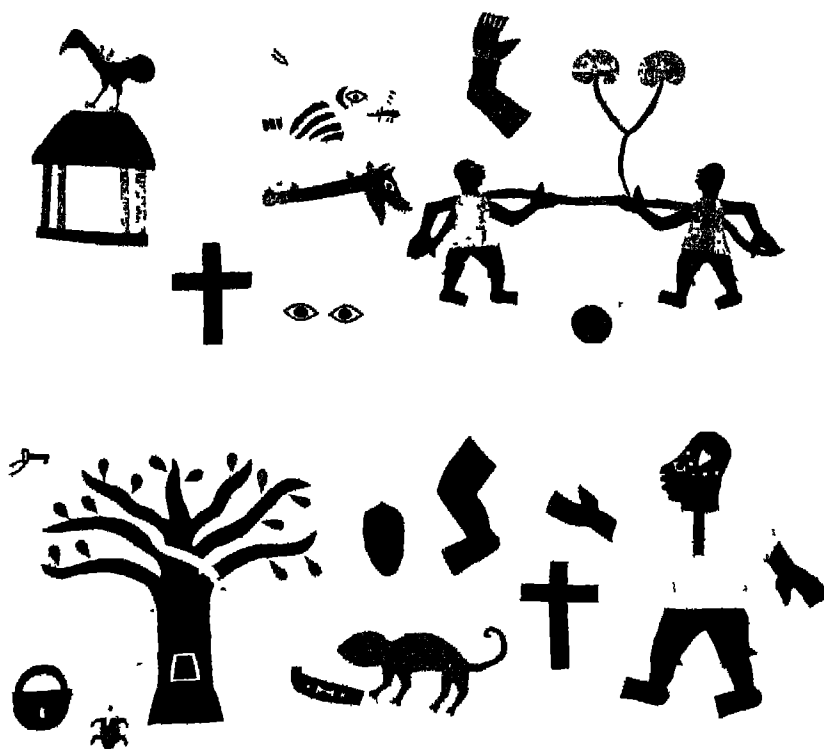
Haiti's Pre-History

Before its conquest by the French in 1894, Dahomey had been for upward of two hundred years the most highly organized and wealthy of the kingdoms of the West African Guinea coast. Along with nearby Benin, Yoruba and Ashanti, all with large populations and class structures resembling feudal Europe, it comprised that part of the continent richest in art and most imaginative in the religious ceremonial rites on which most primitive arts are based. Like its neighbors, too, Dahomey owed its power (and concomitant leisure for a class of administrators, priestly intellectuals and artists) to the 18th century slave trade. As early as 1727, writing of the Dahomeans, Sir William Snelgrave, himself a slaver, had noted that this trade, in which the African tribal chieftains cooperated wholeheartedly with the Portuguese, English and French traders, "was so very considerable, that it is computed while it was in a flourishing state, there were above twenty thousand Negroes yearly exported thence."

It was in this year, 1727, that the Dahomeans, seeking an outlet to the sea and a means of eliminating the coastal tribes from their lucrative position as middle-men in the slave trade, conquered Whydah. Dahomey, with its cooperative cultivation of manioc, maize, millet, yams and fruit, its lively markets conducted entirely by independent and gossiping women, its love of display, and its cult of the dead, even then bore striking resemblance to present-day Haiti. From the defeated Whydahns, the conquerors adopted an institution that was to play a dominant role in the religion of both countries.

The people of Whydah, observed a Dutch traveler of 1700, "have a faint

¹ Dr. Herskovits' *Life in a Haitian Valley* has already been mentioned. His monumental *Dahomey: An Ancient African Kingdom* is among the sources drawn upon in the account of religious origins that follows.

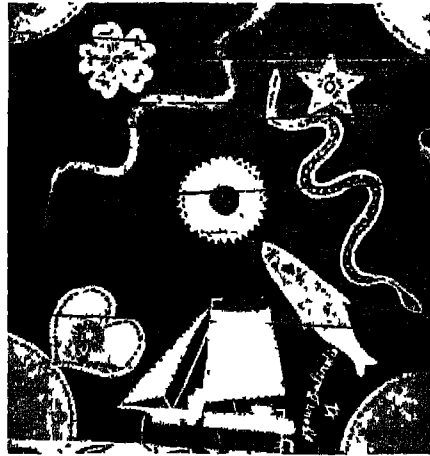


Dahomean Non-Secret Society Banners

idea of the true God . . . yet they do not pray to him or offer any sacrifices to him; for which they give the following reason: God, say they, is too high exalted above us, and too great to condescend or trouble himself over mankind; wherefore he commits the government of the world to their idols. . . . First a certain sort of snake who possesses the chief rank among their gods . . . second, some lofty-high trees . . . third, the sea. . . . They invoke the snake in excessive wet, or barren seasons. . . . The snake-house . . . is situated about two miles from the King's village."¹

Snake worship is believed to have originated far to the east of Whydah, probably in Uganda, whence it moved to the West Coast following Hamitic pressure in the Middle Ages. Even today, among the Wanyamwesi and other tribes inhabiting the area around Lake Tanganyika and as far north and west as the Lake Chad region, a secret cult of the snake is widespread, in which

¹ Quoted in Joseph J. Williams' *Voodooes and Obeahs* (New York, 1932).



Vodun Altar-Painting on Wood

the priests and other initiates enure themselves against the poison of the deadliest of serpents by an extraordinary science of multiple vaccination.¹

The Dahomeans could not have been impressed by the manner in which the King of Whydah, surrounded by his sacred reptiles, hastily invoked their aid and then took to flight. Nevertheless, for reasons of diplomacy, they did not kill the constrictors, and with their genius for symbolism, very rapidly incorporated the new gods in their copious pantheon. Whereas under the Whydahns a man who killed a snake, even inadvertently, was put to death, the Dahomeans sacrificed a goat or a chicken in atonement. "Daboa" had been the name for the Whydah snake god, a species of boa, which the worshipers housed in a "temple" built around a large cotton-tree. In the Dahomean transformation Daboa became Dambada Hwedo, the angry god of souls so old they've been forgotten, and the husband of Aido Hwedo (or Dahn), god of the rainbow.

In Haitian *vodun* today, where actual serpents have for the most part long since ceased to play any role in ceremonies, Damballa Wedo is represented as a thick red constrictor, patron of the spring and of rain, while his wife Ayida takes the form of a long green snake common to Haiti, and again symbolizes the rainbow. Both deities are powers for fertility, and both are pleased by sacrifices of poultry and goats.

¹ See *The Empire of the Snakes* by F. G. Carnochan and H. C. Adamson (New York, 1935).

Damballa and Ayida are only two among a multiplicity of Haitian *vodun* gods; but with the possible exceptions of Legba, the Dahomean oversexed and gluttonous trickster who has become a very kindly and wise old fellow, and Erzulie Fréda Daromain, beneficent protector of the home and of purity, they are the most powerful. Their powers, in Haiti and the homeland alike, can be appreciated only in relation to the pervasive cult of the dead.

Frazer, in his introduction to *The Golden Bough* regards "the fear of the human dead . . . to have been probably the most powerful force in the making of primitive religion." Herskovits, on the other hand, though speaking of course specifically of Dahomey, tempers this belief with a very strong emphasis on the duality of good and evil spirits, and the discipline of a religion capable of controlling the latter:

It must be made clear that the Dahomean does not lead a life dominated by fear. For though fearsome forces are abroad in his world, that world is an ordered one in which the proper safeguards have been vouchsafed man so that he is not subject to the whims of irresponsible beings or capricious powers. It must also be emphasized that the concept of absolutes, so deep-rooted in our thinking, is foreign to the Dahomean, as, indeed, it is to most Africans, who take what some might term a more realistic view. For the gods who can harm can also help, as the parent who punishes can also praise. . . . The fate-cult is also based on the belief that the ends in the life of a man are preordained. Yet just because they are preordained they can be foreseen, and, if unfavorable, in some measure deflected.¹

In the person of Legba, who alone knows the strange tongues (Haitian creole *langage*) spoken by the various other gods—in ignorance one of the other lest they "combine" for too great power—Herskovits points out that the Dahomean has personified the accidental in a world of predestination, "in this way achieving another psychological device to cushion the impact of life upon him. . . . The supernatural world is thus a part of the workaday round, to be met without fear and with full knowledge that for every ill there is a cure, for every problem a specialist."

The point, which has important bearing alike upon the sanguine temperament of the "depressed" Haitian peasant, and upon the serenity of his artistic

¹ *Backgrounds of African Art*, by M. J. Herskovits (Denver Art Museum, 1945).

treatment of the most diabolical themes, is borne out by Carnochan and Adamson, and by the South African psychoanalyst, Wulf Sachs.¹

According to the former, among the Wanyaniwesi,

When a man dies he becomes a good spirit if he were a good man and an evil spirit if he were a bad one; but, good or bad, the dead go on much as they did in life. Those who have been dead only a generation or two are supposed to take a very lively interest in earthly affairs. Hence, the living are constantly trying to keep the good spirits contented, and they are equally busy driving the bad ones out. . . .

According to the latter,

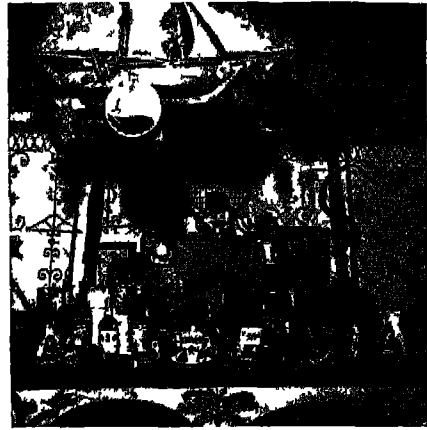
the dead continue to live in the places where they lived in the flesh. . . . The dead and the living form a chain that must not be broken. There is no division of the world between them; the idea of hell, of "the other world" is incomprehensible to them. "When I go to church," one said, "it is the Catholic Church. I look at all the statues. I do look at them and think they might be my midzimu [gods]."

Or again, speaking specifically of the subject of the book, an uprooted medicine-man who is being psychoanalyzed and who has just "spoken" with the spirit of his dead father, Dr. Sachs observes:

For him as for all Africans, there is no rigid dividing line between the living and the dead: he has no conception of a hereafter. The dead continue to exist in the world in the form of midzimu, the spirits of the ancestors. . . . John was appalled by the frigidity of the nurse with the thermometer: "How could a man be treated by a doctor who did not know his name or the name of his father?" He thought of the intimate contact obtained by an African doctor as he throws the bones, when he finds out the luck of the patient, which is the final deciding point in the treatment. . . .

Substitute *houngan* for "medicine-man," *vevers* for "bones," and *loa* for "midzimu," and the analogy with Haitian religious practice is approximate. The important difference is that in Haiti, the primitive worshiper is (relatively speaking) his own master. He is neither, as in present-day Dahomey, a colonial subject, nor, as in the Union of South Africa, an uprooted prole-

¹ *Black Anger* (Little, Brown, Boston, 1947).



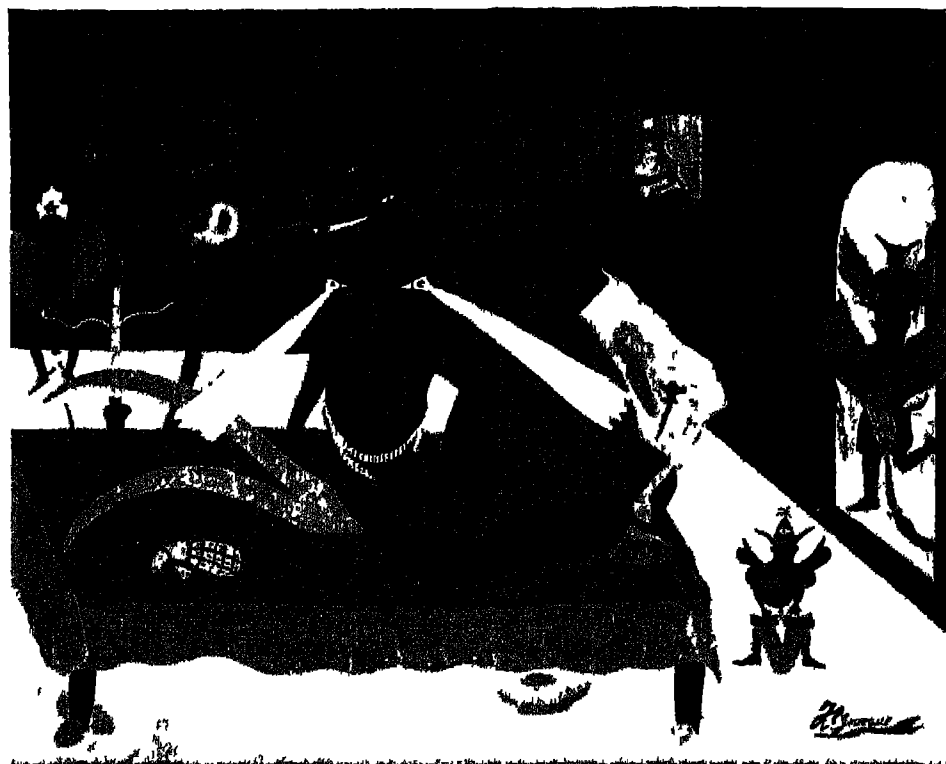
Vodun Altar: Bolosse

tarian, subject to the social discrimination and violent race prejudice of his exploiters. In consequence, the Haitian's religion has become more and more a set of rites designed to bring the individual into harmony with nature, and less and less a refuge from real or imagined persecution. It has no theology. Its poetry is the dance. Its therapy is the sacrificial ceremony at which evil spirits are propitiated and the troubled peasant is possessed (or "mounted") by his *loa*.

The notion of sin in our sense of an act which transgresses moral law has no place in *vodun*. Of the countless good spirits, each has its particular dress, color, symbol, song. Relaxation, not restraint, is the desirable goal. Only the unimaginative or the abnormal escape the inspiration of possession. The *houngan* is merely an expert in communication, a more inspired devotee.

Is the compulsion of *vodun* primarily sexual? Only in a limited sense. All-night dancing to the simplest repetitive drum-rhythms certainly cannot be regarded as wholly ritualistic or as a simple pastime, nor for that matter as primarily aesthetic in character; on the other hand the obviously sexual movements of the belly and hips seem not to be directed at a specific object: there is less actual contact between the sexes than in conventional ballroom dancing. Ceremonies rarely become orgiastic. And the sexual symbols used in the ritual itself and in its accoutrements do not seem to be consciously recognized as such. One remembers Jung's admonition that a phallic cult does not necessarily indicate a particularly lascivious life any more than Christianity's ascetic symbolism means an especially continent one.

D. ENGUÉRRAND GOURGUE: The Magic Table



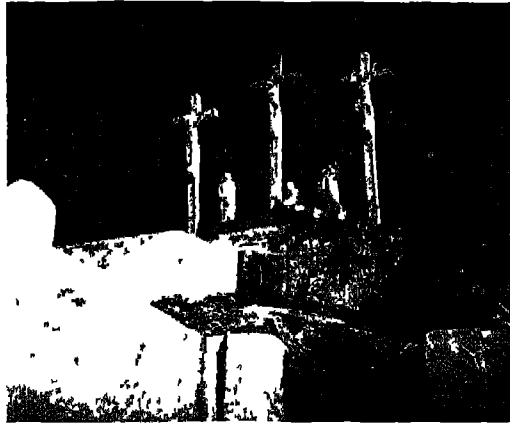
Whatever truth there may be in the psychoanalytic school's contention that such basic myths of humanity as that of the earth mother, the virgin birth and the resurrection arise to circumvent incestuous or libidinous compulsions, the possibility of simpler explanations cannot be ignored. Later transference to more sublimated levels may have taken place. And just as early Christianity displaced the formalistic religion of the Greco-Roman world by taking over the fertility symbols of primitive cults, so *vodun* re-inserts these symbols creatively into the Christian ritual where they once flourished.

The Growth of Religious Art

Haitian religious painting is a phenomenon unique in the Western Hemisphere. And if one is to consider only the Christian (and secondary) component of this sudden flowering of religious art in the Black Republic, it may well be a phenomenon unique in the present-day world. A whole school of painters paints religion (among other things) not because it is commissioned to do so, or paid for it by the Church—the Church, preferring cheap chromolithographs and bad copies of Guido Reni altarpieces, has never been known to buy a native work of art—but simply because Catholicism to the Haitian peasant is a small but important component of religion (*vodun*) and as such deserves to be memorialized lovingly in paint.

How the African and Roman Catholic religions got mixed up in Haiti has already been touched upon. We saw how from 1805 to 1860 the *houngan* held undisputed spiritual sway. Thereafter he had to share his flock, at least in the more populous towns, with the Catholic brotherhood who had converted the ruling caste; and there followed successive attempts to stamp out *vodun*—by bribery, intimidation, education, arson, by destroying the musical instruments, even by cutting down hundreds of the giant Mapou trees which were reputed to shelter propitious spirits. All these efforts were unsuccessful.

The Haitian peasant, who is by nature warm-hearted, accommodating and tolerant, made no attempt to retaliate in kind. Instead, he welcomed the Catholic gods into his ample *houmfor*. At first, in a way, it was a little like a group of uninvited guests who have crashed a masquerade ball, but once the gate-crashers themselves had been equipped with suitable masks they melted into the crowd, and everybody (at least inside the ballroom) was happy. Thus Legba became interchangeable with Saint Anthony; Damballa with Saint Patrick, whose way with serpents is well known; and Erzulie Fréda,



Catholic Shrine: Miragôane

whose favorite color is white and whose symbol is the heart, with the Virgin Mary. Thus, too, a *vodun* altar will be decorated with the same lithos as a Catholic one, and a few words of Latin (a long-forgotten African dialect is sometimes substituted) will be intoned by the *houngan* before the ceremony begins. In fact at Ville-Bonheur, where annually the greatest religious event in Haiti, a festival in honor of the Virgin of the Palms, attracts thousands from all over the island, the crowd surges from mass in the village church to the nearby waterfalls of Saut d'Eau (sacred to Damballa and Ayida Wedo)



Vodun Baptismal Rite: Saut d'Eau

where occur the most sudden and violent *crises de possession*, or seizures by the African *loa*.

In *vodun* itself, music and the dance overshadow any manifestations of the graphic or plastic arts that may appear on the walls of the temple or the drums themselves. But there is a curious exception. Before the sacrifice, and in order to call up a particular *loa*, it is customary for the *houngan* to draw (with cornmeal or a mixture of flour and ashes) on the earthen floor of the *tonnelle* and around its central column, cabalistic pictographs, called *vevers*, each one of which symbolizes a particular deity. While he works, the *houngan*, his female assistants, chant the ritual song: "Après Dieu houngan vever moin!" The drawings are sown out with seeming carelessness, and once finished are trampled into oblivion by the bare feet of the dancers. Yet they are executed with astonishing precision; invariably the semi-abstract patterns are perfect, and sometimes a whole group of them will be flung about the post, never overlapping or conflicting with each other.

Whence came the *vevers*? There is nothing like them in Africa. There is something like them in North American Indian sand-drawing. Yet the aboriginal Arawak tribe that inhabited Hispaniola had been wiped out by the Spaniards, as we have already noted, less than twenty years after Columbus landed on the northern coast. There is a legend that a few Indians were imported from Mexico to work the gold mines before Columbus' son, Diego, took Las Casas' advice and began to import from Africa the men "who have no souls." Possibly these refugees from Cortez introduced the method. The symbols themselves—the serpents of Damballa and his wife, the ploughed field of Aïzon, the ship of Agwe Woyo, Legba's crook and the iron blades



Vevers of Aïzon, Damballa, Ogoun and Erzulie

of Ogoun Feraille—are African. Only the heart of Erzulie and such incidental tracery as the crossed flags, compasses and geometrical eye, are European (and Masonic) in their origin. My own feeling is that the grouping of symbols around a central post is a carry-over from the plan of the celebrated snake temple at Whydah.

Three Religious Painters

It may seem a long way from flour abstractions to the tightly organized primitivism of such masters of the Haitian renaissance as Castera Bazile and Enguérrand Gourgue or Hector Hyppolite. Actually, however, Bazile and Gourgue, aged twenty-four and seventeen respectively, while Catholic communicants, have participated actively in countless *vodun* ceremonies. Hyppolite, now fifty-four, has been a *houngan* himself almost as long as he can remember, and very likely acquired his initial skill as well as the desire to memorialize his gods in the more stable medium of paint, while making *vevers*.

Of these three primarily religious painters, Hyppolite, whose story will be told in the following chapter, is most thoroughly concerned with portraying (celebrating is perhaps the better word) the mysteries and divinities of *vodun*. Though he makes a more experimental use of color and of paint-quality than any other Haitian painter, he appears to have less conscious aesthetic discrimination than the others. Asked once, by DeWitt Peters, why he had painted five almost identical portraits of Haitian presidents, each somewhat in the manner of a glorified cigar-band, he replied: "Because each was an important personage and therefore worthy of a portrait." In other words, painting for Hyppolite is itself a kind of religious possession: under its seizure, his "normal" state, he paints magnificently; at other times he can produce, and does without any sense of shame, some of the most uninspired pictures ever to pass through the Centre d'Art.

Castera Bazile is at once a simpler and a more knowing personality. He has none of Hyppolite's flamboyant visions. He would not dream of suspending a bed two feet from the floor, or of juxtaposing a man spanking his wife with a tame lioness. His distortions are never violent. His world, whether the canvas depicts Catholicism or *vodun*, is an orderly one. His orange or green doors, suspended by long black hinges, are always precisely in the center of his well-thatched *cailles*. His peasant women are invariably in full face or profile and when they are in profile the head and nose for some reason become enlarged fantastically. Even the flames which spurt from the loins and



The Graveyard by Bazile

armpits of his *loup-garous* (werewolves) are meticulously painted. Upon such incidentals as baskets, fruit, cassava, which Hyppolite might treat rather freely and expressionistically, Castera is likely to lavish the workmanship of a jeweler.

He is more knowing in this sense: he "believes" with a certain detachment. It is not that he practices two religions: almost all the three million Haitian peasants within range of a church are Catholic communicants, and all of them are *vaudouistes*; there is little conflict there. It is rather that Castera Bazile grew up in cities, first in Jacmel and later in Port-au-Prince, where, as Peters' houseboy, he asked for and received some cans of furniture enamel. At the same time, it seems, he took a certain worldly, or perhaps painterly, view of things. I asked him, for example, why in the picture called "The Graveyard," Baron Samedi, alternate *vodun* god of cemeteries with Papa Guédé, was driving his charges into the church. "Because," he answered me quite seriously, "they are dead and have nothing better to do. . . ." "Than what?" I persisted. "Than go to church," he continued, "you know, like the old people who are always going to church . . . so it is with the dead . . . what else is there for them to do?"

Yet Bazile is far from being a cynic. He paints and repaints the Virgin, he says, because her presence among mankind is the most enduring and encouraging wonder. And he surrounds her with so many beautifully robed angels (Colorplate B) because they express the adoration that is in his own heart.

Still another step removed from direct religious experience, yet capable of existing nowhere but in an atmosphere of belief, are the pictures of the seven-

teen-year-old Gourgue. Gourgue paints, for the most part, not *vodun* but *magie noire*. The difference is fundamental. *Vodun* is a religion, a systematized means of dealing with the forces of the universe, good and evil. Black Magic, on the other hand, is sorcery: the evocation of evil spirits to accomplish evil works—personal aggrandizement or gain, securing the affections of another man's wife, putting an enemy out of the way, or the like. Every *botiman* knows how to make Black Magic, but no reputable one will practice it. Hyppolite, once, was lamenting the slow progress of a boat that was being built for him. Jokingly I asked him why he didn't create some *zombis* (automatons brought back from the grave to work nights for a magician)¹ to finish it for him. He laughed and shook his head. "You know what would happen, of course?" I didn't. "The ship," he said, pointing in the direction of Ile de la Gonave, "would sail out there, run into a hurricane and sink with all hands aboard." There was no question at all about his ability to finish the sailing vessel in this fashion did he so desire; it was simply that retribution would be inevitable.

Gourgue, of course, has never had traffic with Black Magic either; but like most Haitians he knows all about it, and unlike most he has visualized its cosmos down to the smallest cloven hoof. As an infernal cosmos, it bears striking resemblance to a well-equipped psychoanalyst's dream-house. It is complete with all the properties and accessories of the racial subconscious. Yet withal too evenly lighted and gaily colored and orderly to be exactly frightening. One has the feeling, though, that one has been in a room like this before—perhaps in a nightmare. And the sexual symbols accord well with the popular song:

¹ Carnochan and Adamson, in a chapter of *The Empire of the Snakes* throw light on the widely held Haitian belief in *zombis*. After seeing a native who had partaken of powder made of the root *Kingoliola* obey orders to dance while bearing a stool attached to his tongue by a huge thorn, Carnochan himself took a pinch of the mysterious drug. "I lacked all power to move. . . . I could not think. I could not feel. I could not plan. I had no hallucinations. No dreams. No craving for sleep. None of the reactions, mental or physical, of any of the known habit-forming drugs that are derived from opium or the coca leaf. For two hours I sat in that chair and stared in the mirror with unblinking eyes while my image stared back. . . . One moment I was as soulless as my image in the mirror, and the next I was absolutely normal." Whether a similar drug is involved in the Haitian belief in *zombis* or whether the peasant has simply a legendary memory of some such practice in the homeland is anybody's guess. Émile Roumère assures me that there is such a drug. Both explanations may be valid.

*Maman, cher maman,
Mais coulev' ap' valé moin!*

.
*Sizanne, cher ma fi,
L'heure 'm té jeune, c'est comme ca m' té yé. . .*

(Mother, dear mother,
A snake is after me!

.
Suzanne, my darling child,
When I was young, the same thing happened to me. . . .)

In one of Gourgue's pictures (Colorplate E) a small table with a tablecloth supports a gigantic bull's head; white light fans out from the eye-sockets and between the bull's horns reposes the fanged head of a very large python. Attendant devils in a doorway to the right carry (by one foot) a tiny naked man with blood spurting from his heart; this blood, conveniently enough, is being caught by another serpent. The properties resemble something out of Dali, yet the over-all effect is rather like the Picasso of the Guernica period—two painters that Gourgue, of course, had never heard of.

In a second picture a human victim is being sacrificed on a table at the extreme left, and the victim's blood spills into a basin. The problem, here, is how to get the blood to the snake, which in this case, after looping through several exactly circular holes in the floor, comes out on the extreme right.



Enguérrand Gourgue

Gourgue accomplishes this very neatly with a pipeline which hangs realistically enough from an elegant bracket on the rear wall.

In a third, which employs the same cool, pastel shades of green and lavender and pink, emphasis is on the serpent again, this time emerging from an endless perspective of chambers, and on the sacrificial weapon, a gigantic and unmistakably phallic machete.

Gourgue's only comment on the first of these three pictures is interesting. "*Le boeuf, c'est la femme; le coulev', c'est l'homme.*" At least it ties in rather well with Jung's interpretation of serpent-and-bull symbolism in Mithraic ritual, where the liturgy read: "You will see a god, very powerful, with a shining countenance . . . holding a bullock's golden shoulder . . . out of his eyes you will see lightning spring forth." The bull, a *feminine* symbol, quite frequently, represents the fruitfulness of the sun. Condensing Jung's exegesis from *The Psychology of the Unconscious*:

The struggle is for the mother . . . The bull symbolizes the living hero, the shining sun, but . . . the serpent symbolizes the dead, buried or chthonic hero, the invisible sun. As the hero is in the mother in the state of death, the serpent is also, as the symbol of the fear of death, the sign of the devouring mother. The sacrifice of the bull to the serpent, therefore, signifies a willing renunciation of life, in order to win it from death. Therefore after the sacrifice of the bull, wonderful fertility results . . . the chthonic snake demon drinks the blood; that is to say, the libido (sperma) of the hero committing incest.



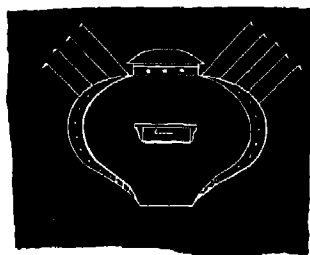
Black Magic by Gourgue



Mardi Gras Celebrants at Jacmel

Mithraism, it will be recalled, like the religion of Greece, did not regard the beauties of nature as antagonistic to the spirit, but worshiped them. Christian training, on the other hand, as Jung and others have pointed out, produced a widespread weakening of the animal nature, and not until the Renaissance was the "abundance of the libido allowed to spill forth again by way of the truly religious transference to nature." *Vodun*, like Mithra, allows no antagonism between the body and the soul. Is it surprising, then, that the religious painters of the Haitian renaissance deal as easily and fruitfully with the treasure-house of the subconscious as Sassetta and Piero di Cosimo, or Hieronymus Bosch?

ICI LA RENAISSANCE: THE DISCOVERY OF HECTOR HYPOLITE



"Poetic rendering is that which allows the echo of the primitive word to resound through the form."

GERHART HAUPTMANN

One day in the autumn of 1943, when DeWitt Peters was still serving his wartime stint as a teacher for the U.S. Office of Education, he happened to drive through Mont-Rouis, a tiny village between Port-au-Prince and St.-Marc. Turning a palm-shaded corner, he caught sight of a pair of gaily decorated doors on the porch of a roadside "bar," whose other embellishments were the usual Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola signs. Tropical birds in green and red alternated with intricately designed flowers on the door panels; they had been painted by someone who evidently knew what he was doing. The name of the wine shop was *Ici La Renaissance*.

It was almost a year later that Peters, who had in the meantime opened the art center in Port-au-Prince, set out to find the anonymous painter. Establishing that his name was Hector Hyppolite, that he was a *houngan* who made a precarious living by painting houses and occasionally decorating furniture with a brush of chicken feathers, Peters discovered the artist in nearby St.-Marc. Poor as he was, even by Haitian standards, Hyppolite managed somehow to support a mistress with two children of her own; but Peters had little difficulty in persuading him to come to Port-au-Prince and try his hand at easel painting. Besides, the artist had recently had a "vision": he had been

apprised by the gods that a man would come from over the seas to buy five of his pictures and that his life would change for the better.

In Port-au-Prince where such talented popular painters as Rigaud B noit, Louverture Poisson and Philom  Obin had already been discovered and where the galleries of the newly opened Centre d'Art were already humming with creative activity and tourist curiosity, it would have been easy to take the invigorating *quattrocento* air in a carnival spirit.

Hyppolite was not one who had much use for guilds, and he made his own carnivals. Establishing himself in a palm-frond hut with a dirt floor on the outskirts of the city, he set up a sign "*Ici Station Peinture*" and went to work with his cans of furniture enamel. Seven days later he appeared at Peters' office with sixteen finished pictures under his arm. Some were local landscapes, some were ceremonial scenes. One showed Damballa as a young rain-god, with his symbolic snake entering a trouser pocket and emerging from the fly. The paintings were all without perspective, the paint laid on in almost savage strokes, maroon and crimson daringly juxtaposed. The border flowers of blue or pink or gold were strangely luminescent.

Peters saw that the pictures were uneven and crude, with a sameness of skies and flowers in each; but he was astounded at their invention. Wifredo Lam, the Cuban painter, then passing through Port-au-Prince on a tour of the Caribbean with Andr  Breton, high priest of surrealism, bought two. Breton (had he heard of the artist's vision?) bought five at eight dollars



Bar de la Renaissance: Mont-Rouis

apiece to take to Paris. "This," he is reported to have said, "should revolutionize French painting, it needs a revolution."

Hyppolite's Trials

Hector Hyppolite, by his own account, was born in St.-Marc September 16th, 1894. His father and grandfather were *houngans* so he required no special instruction to understand that poetic union of Catholic ritual and African animism which is the gentle, pervasive religion of the Haitian peasant. He was apprenticed to a shoemaker at twelve, but he preferred to study the decalcomanias in the waterfront stores and copy them on postcards for the American Marines. Sometime during the first World War he boarded a coastal freighter and, after spending several months in Camaguey, Cuba, began the five years of travel that were to leave a haunting impression on his later paintings.

Hyppolite's account of these five years is vague. A Cuban Negress, he says, put up \$1,000 with which he and a painter named Echeberry were to take her to New York. From New York the two artists embarked on a freighter for French Equatorial Africa. After admiring the Dahomey temple carvings of his ancestors, Hyppolite and his friend set forth on foot for Abyssinia. They supported themselves on this three-year trek, according to Hyppolite, by painting floral decorations on the chamber-pots of local hostleries; "they were the best-painted chamber-pots in the world." Hyppolite is still more reticent about the two years he claims to have spent among the Ethiopians, but those who have seen his almond-eyed angels and Coptic demons find it easy to believe that the artist has more than a racial memory of the gaudy Byzantine frescoes in the rock monasteries of Kwarata and Aduwa.

In 1920 Hyppolite returned to Haiti, at first wandering from village to village attempting to stave off poverty with paint, finally settling in St.-Marc and abandoning himself to melancholy. Sometimes he would splatter blue and red paint on the wall and study the patterns. But more often he would lose himself in the ritual of his faith, composing magnificent fêtes and apocalyptic compositions in his mind's eye. John the Baptist, who now directs what he shall paint, was silent in those years.

The Years of Achievement

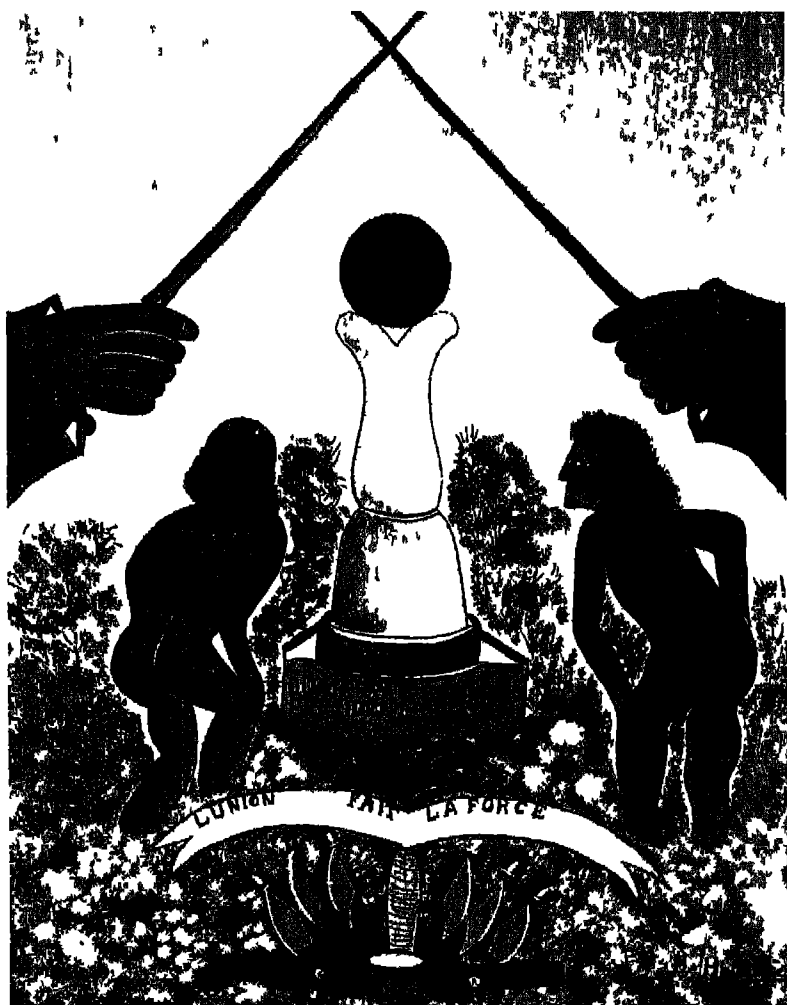
Hyppolite today shares with Obin the distinction of being the most celebrated painter in his country's history. In the January 1947 UNESCO ex-



Door Panels at Mont-Rouis by Hyppolite

hibit referred to earlier, it was the consensus of visitors that among the outstanding popular Haitian pictures, those of Hector Hyppolite had stolen the show. Technical problems, it was observed, which had been solved and re-solved to the point of boredom for centuries in the West, were side-stepped by Hyppolite and the other Haitian artists with the same naïveté that gave to the painters of the early Italian Renaissance their special directness—the directness that comes from stating the initial vision in a shorthand of primary emotional gestures and symbols rather than in the encumbering longhand of quasi-photographic naturalism. The reason, therefore, why the best canvases of Hyppolite in Paris often recalled the work of Rouault and Matisse without giving any appearance of being “influenced” by the French masters, was that the latter, in their effort to rid themselves of traditional “longhand” had fallen back on the more direct language of primitive “shorthand.”

In the United States, Hyppolite now began to achieve the kind of fame that could be translated into a livelihood. Critics like René d’Harnoncourt and Robert Goldwater spoke admiringly of his work. Newspapers took notice. Magazines began to reproduce his paintings in color. Visiting celebrities bought his pictures. The American-British Art Center gave him the first one-man show ever accorded a Haitian popular artist, and it was well re-



A Haitian Memorial by Hyppolite

ceived by the critics. In England, to which his pictures had already been brought by Julian Huxley, Stephen Spender and others, his work was featured in surveys of the Haitian renaissance in *The Changing Nation* and *Picture Post*. He became overnight, by Haitian standards, a wealthy man.

He was advised to live accordingly, but it didn't work. About a month in a rented American-type stucco house with concrete floors was enough to



Hyppolite with Paintings
of Black Magic

convince Hyppolite that his painting was the product of an environment he had grown up in. Automobiles and plumbing did not prove conducive to *either mystical or aesthetic possession*. He moved back into a *caille* in the waterfront slums where nothing but the tools of his trade and the elegance of his bearing distinguish him from his neighbors. Instead of putting his money in a bank, he bought a small fishing vessel and hired a local fisherman to operate it for him; the fish that Hyppolite and his elastic household failed to consume were sold in the neighborhood market at a modest profit. He built and stocked a corner grocery shop where soft drinks are sold. And though his neighbors were impressed by Hyppolite's expanding ménage, they took it as a matter of course that art is the best paying business in the world.

A Painter's Home

Visitors to the *caille* Hyppolite—they come almost every day, and from every part of the world—approach the district, known with some justice as "*Trou de Cochon*," on foot along the track of a narrow-gauge sugar railway. Thread-
ing their way toward the waterfront through a labyrinth of jerry-built shacks alive with busy, chattering people, they come upon the entrance to the painter's palm-thatched home.

If Hyppolite is not at work they will probably find him standing in the doorway, surveying the crowded scene with his sweet but tired smile. He will be clad, as likely as not, in striped pajamas or in a purple bathrobe bearing the gold-embroidered insignia of the United States Navy on its pocket, his feet encased in a pair of gilded sandals; his wiry hair, parted in the middle, shaved around the ears, and then flaring sidewise untrimmed—with somewhat the effect of a dusty, magnetized crown. He is very black, but his features seem more Indian than African—the nose aquiline, the cheekbones high and sharp, the mouth rather compressed. Only his eyes, shifting between expressions of patient benevolence and remote concentration, reflect the anonymous decades of wandering that preceded the artist's three years of fame.

In the spacious *tonnelle*, open to the alley, Hyppolite sleeps, paints and holds infrequent *vodun* ceremonies. The floor is dirt. The roof is loosely woven wood and palm thatch. Rafters are decorated with cut-out paper stars, balls of tinsel and ragged, uneven strips of red, white and brown confetti or tissue paper. Paintings, finished and unfinished, line the walls and crowd the tables. In the corner is a great cross, dedicated to Baron Samedi and flanked with offerings of food and wine. Facing the doorway is a double-bed covered with a mosquito netting.

The back of the house, separated from the *tonnelle* with strips of banana-bark and covered with a tin roof, contains a chamber in which Hyppolite's three servants will generally be found cooking, and the *houmfor* itself. The altar is piled high with painted calabashes, votive lights, rum bottles, fetishes, amulets and cheap prints of the Catholic saints, in the exact center of which stands a small, framed, academic portrait on glass, of the artist himself. To one side hang Hyppolite's ceremonial robes and flags, to the other, on a chair and under gauze, are two dressed-up puppets representing the *loa* of the sea, flanked by a golden crown heavily encrusted with cut-glass jewels, and the detached headlamp of an abandoned car.

Portrait of the Artist as a Vodun Priest

Tall, almost emaciated, Hyppolite in the doorway will indicate with the gesture of a Hebrew prophet that further mysteries lie beyond. He opens the back "door" to a clamor of sawing and hammering. On stilts and blocks stands the unfinished hull of a large sailing vessel. The ribs are fashioned of gnarled saplings, incredibly held together with cord but the longitudinal strakes are of well-seasoned lumber, nicely fitted. With a sweep of his hand



E. HECTOR HYPPOLITE: A House in the Country

that takes in the ship, the shipwrights and the diminishing piles of pitch and nails, Hyppolite offers the opinion that Peters is only now beginning to understand that this grandiose project, far from detracting from his painting, will provide the security and spiritual well-being by which his art will rise to heights undreamed of. "Maitresse La Sirène," he says, "went to my friends and told them it wasn't true my imagination would suffer. Then they believed me and gave me the money. So now I am building my boat and my imagination is better than ever. The colors have suddenly become more lively."

To Edith Efron Bogat of Port-au-Prince, Hyppolite confided the details of his relationship with the Water Goddess:

"I'm married, you know, to my protective spirit, so I can't marry anyone else. When I was a child, my grandfather, a great priest of vaudou, married me to La Sirène, and she has always been my mystic wife. But I have three mistresses. That's not very many. Usually I have seven. But lately I've been getting disgusted with women. They're always getting into trouble. So I have only three now. They live well together. They're not jealous. Why should they be? It's a great advantage to them to be my mistresses, after all. . . . They eat regularly, sleep regularly, and I'm an expert in love matters. So altogether they have little to complain about. I have several children outside, but they're all grown up now; they're big and they're ambitious and they're just waiting for me to die so they can inherit from me. But my new baby—ah, she's different. I shall bring her up in my own way. Her name signifies love. So when she's a grown woman and a man calls her by her name, he will be saying to her: You are my love."

Hyppolite went on to say that while his painting changed in accordance with the changes in his view of life, and that he could be sad one day and gay another, he invariably painted three hours in the morning.

"I'm always in the mood to paint. It's because of Saint John the Baptist.¹ He inspires me. He's always with me, always stimulating me. I finish about two pictures a week. I used to paint on cardboard with Sapolin house paint, but now I mix in real oils and I work on celotex, plywood, masonite, all sorts of things. I've painted ever since I can recall. And I've always been inspired. Both La Sirène and Saint John take care of me. La Sirène helps me to earn money and Saint John gives me the ideas for my painting.

¹ Hyppolite sometimes identifies this *loa* with Philippe Thoby-Marcelin who was with Peters when the latter sought him out in St.-Marc, and who suggested the subject for the first picture he painted in Port-au-Prince.



Spirits at a Crossroads by Hyppolite

"I haven't practiced vaudou for a while," he went on. "I asked the spirits permission to suspend my work as a *houngan*, because of my painting. Also you know, there are so many false priests around today that it saddens me. The spirits agreed that I should stop for a while. I've always been a priest, just like my father and grandfather, but now I'm more an artist than a priest. When people ask me now what I am, I say that I am an artist."

In the course of a typical working day, Hyppolite will rise at six, wander into the Centre d'Art—"to pay my respects to Mr. Peters"—and paint steadily from nine o'clock to noon. Afternoons he is apt to take in a movie at the Rex Theatre in the Champ de Mars with Rigaud B noit, his inseparable companion. "I like all kinds of movies," he says, "American, French, Spanish . . . as long as they're about love. Love pictures inspire me. Love is very important to an artist. You know the way one caresses a beautiful young girl? That's the way I caress a tableau."

Hyppolite's Style

Unlike any other of the Haitian primitives, Hyppolite makes no effort to achieve a realistic effect in his pictures. If he ever went in for precise modeling of details, he has abandoned it. It would be unfair to say that his powers of observation are not good, because his intentions so obviously are in the

direction of expressionistic fantasy. Rarely, for example, does the sky appear in his pictures; he prefers to fill in the background of a landscape or the space between figures with a solid color, with mottlings of indeterminate shape or (as in the "Nude Woman"—Plate 11) with a formalistic design. The background of "Spirits at a Crossroad" is modulated from dark and light grays at the top to blue-green at the bottom, with patches of pale yellow between and below the crossed arms. The blossoms above the *caille* in "Gréssier Road" (Plate 14) are impressionistic stippings giving the effect of having been spattered onto the canvas.

After making a preliminary drawing in pencil, Hyppolite will fill in some of the larger masses with his brush. Then with chicken feathers he will add black bordering lines, features, and perfunctory marks to indicate shadows or the folds in drapery. He prepares this delicate instrument by puncturing the root of a quill with a pin and inserting in the hole a tuft of barbs. Flowers are painted by dabbing spots of mixed color on the canvas with one finger and then smearing them until an opalescent tonality is achieved.

In such very early pictures as the two small landscapes belonging to Maurice de Young, American proprietor of the Hotel Oloffson in Port-au-Prince, and one of the earliest friends of the Centre d'Art, Hyppolite tended to use subdued colors and to convey a poetic sense of remoteness by placing very small human figures and animals against a background of hills or fantastic houses. In 1946 and 1947, as he began to feel his powers and the possibilities of the medium, the figures became large and bold, the colors vivid to the point of garishness. Finally in 1948, with a sense of assurance and security, he developed a more subtle use of color and the religious pictures began to be at once freer of convention and less disturbingly strident.

Although in his early pictures the style is recognizably his own, Hyppolite has exploited none of his characteristic devices. The two magic tables (Plates 9, 10), the nude woman (Plate 11), the lovers (Plate 12) and the portrait of Dessalines (Plate 13) are good examples of Hyppolite's middle period. In the picture of the woman flanked by bathing beauties, the three vignettes (perhaps suggested by the designs on toilet-water labels) are a carry-over from the earlier period. The color scheme of this picture, from maroon in the corners to the powder-blue cloud surrounding the sofa and the brilliant yellow of the headdress, is startling. Of the "Two Lovers," Hyppolite remarked, "She looks as if she refuses, but she consents." In other pictures distortion is employed with maximum force to convey sensuality. In the "Dessalines," intensity is achieved by contrasting the simple modeling of the

head with its profusely swarming decorative surroundings, and by painting the irises of the eyes a shocking pink. Nothing is subtracted from the monumentality of the magic tables by including a variety of small symbolic objects as central abstractions.

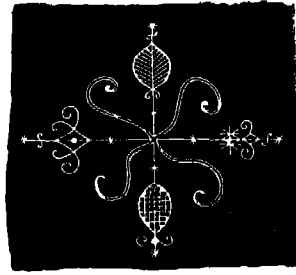
"Papa Ogoun and Papa Zaca" (Plate 15) and "Gréssier Road" are transitional pictures along the path to such recent works as "Spirits at a Crossroads" and "Macanda" (Plate 16). The Coptic demons and inscrutable *loa* in the first are familiar, but the white spots on the oncoming horses are not. Observe in the later works how much more effectively figures and landscape are integrated into the picture space than in his middle period. In "Spirits at a Crossroads" Hyppolite, probably in consequence of his increasing retirement as a *houngan*, is beginning to treat religious subjects much more in terms of fantasy than of meaningful ritual. Significantly enough he tends to paint less and less the *vodun loa* in whom he believes, and more and more the scenes of Black Magic—*zombis*, *macanda* and the like—which, though he may not wholly discount them as supernatural phenomena, he at least philosophically disapproves. Pictorially, at any rate, these subjects provide more play to his imagination than the celebration of familiar deities.

A Debt

It is entirely possible that Hyppolite never traveled to Africa, that the experience took shape first in his mind, partly as an escape from the frustrations of a life in Haiti that offered no rewards to his aesthetic ambitions, and partly as the fulfillment of a wish, an effort to identify himself more closely with ancestral religious and artistic images; that only later, when the frustration no longer existed, did the dream acquire reality—the kind of reality that would enhance his prestige as the man of the world, the celebrity and unique prophet he had suddenly become.

Those who know Hyppolite well, either as man or as artist, and whether as sophisticated critics or as peasant neighbors, have no doubt of his genius. Hardly less, indeed, than Hyppolite has himself. The important consideration is rather that without the climate and opportunities offered by the renaissance in Haiti, Hyppolite's genius would have remained locked in his soul, his painting no more developed than the elementary patterns on the doors (now whitewashed into oblivion) in the Bar de la Renaissance at Mont-Rouïs. And Hyppolite himself, when he speaks of his fellow popular artists as "my comrades" and of Peters as his guardian "Saint Joseph," acknowledges in all humility that overwhelming debt.

BACKGROUND TO FOREGROUND



"Primitive art is the most pure, most sincere form of art there can be, partly because it is deeply inspired by religious ideas and spiritual experience, and partly because it is entirely unself-conscious as art; there are no tricks that can be acquired by the unworthy, and no technical exercises which can masquerade as works of inspiration."

G. A. STEVENS

Those who dismiss the dominant trend in 20th century painting and sculpture, generally dislike the art of primitive people for the same reasons. They say it is "crude," "unlifelike," "ugly," "frightening," "irrational," and "foreign." And sometimes, as a crushing afterthought, they add: "I could do as well myself."

In a sense (a very limited sense) they are right on all counts. The afterthought is both an inadvertent admission of lost innocence and the supreme tribute to simplicity. Any art which is concerned unself-consciously with projecting life as the artist feels it or imagines it, rather than in gaining primarily an aesthetic effect of verisimilitude or "beauty," *concentrates on essentials*; only bad art is actually "crude." To say that such art is "unlifelike" is generally to say that the artist is not concerned with an exact transcription of nature; Beethoven, it could be argued with as much cogency, would have written better music had he limited the sound effects in his scores to the calls

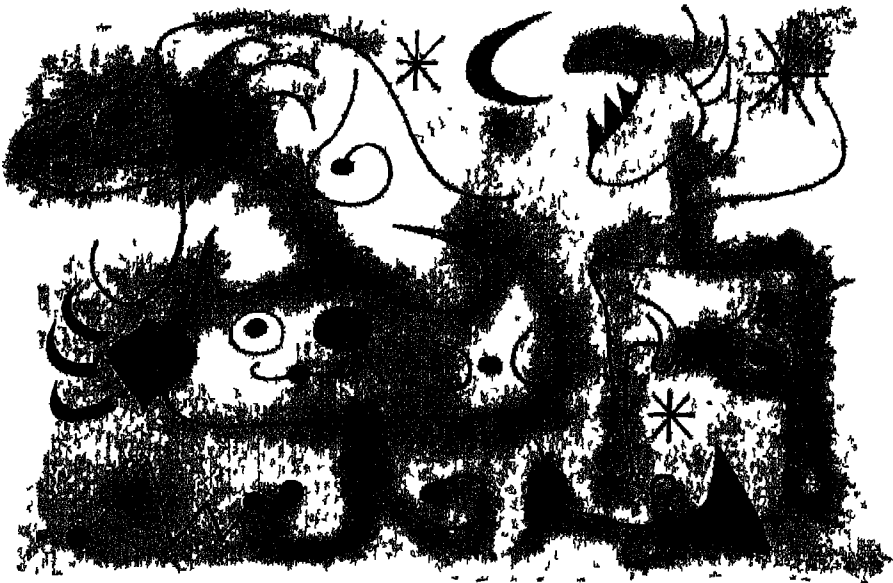
of birds and animals, the noises of traffic and oratory. What is "ugly" depends on the range and discrimination of one's appreciation of what is beautiful; driftwood and oyster shells have their devotees as well as Dietrich's legs and it is possible even to admire both. One is "frightened" by certain dreams, as well as by Lear's "irrational" compulsion to wipe his hand because it "smells of mortality," without denying that they may be important comments on life. And if any part of this fearfully interrelated globe, any community of atavism in the soul of man, or effort to exorcise hostility by giving it enduring form, remains "foreign" yet, it had better be quickly understood.

When Ruskin said that "Greater completion marks the progress of art; absolute perfection its decline," he had in mind those two epochs in the history of art which were primarily concerned with the accurate rendering of the human body, and which furnish the criteria by which the general public still approaches a picture or a sculpture. Athens gave way to Rome, the High Renaissance was followed by the baroque; ergo, the painting of Picasso is an obscurantist postscript to the work of Ingres and Toulouse-Lautrec; Henry Moore is a "decadent" godchild of Rodin; and Tamayo of Rivera. Realism is the norm. But is it?

Between 1900 and 1910 a revolution took place in the criticism of art and in art itself with which the public today is only beginning to catch up. Artists—and critics—became aware for the first time of certain universal qualities of expression, design and plastic value common to the best work of all ages. The idea of "progress" was seen to have relevance only in terms of the mastery of technical problems which a given group of artists might recognize for their own discipline. Primitive art in the newly organized ethnological museums—in particular the highly developed sculpture of Benin, the Ivory Coast and the Congo—became available to artists and public for the first time and was seen to equal the sculpture of any of the great periods hitherto considered supreme. Concurrently the work of the naïve French painter Rousseau, and of other folk painters elsewhere, began to evoke the admiration of the more perceptive. A forgotten analysis of the painting of children, when translated into German in 1906, was studied by artists who realized that by understanding the sources of spontaneity they might liberate contemporary art from the dead hand of the academies. And finally Western naturalistic painting itself was revalued, raising to the top rank for the first time such neglected giants as Sassetta and Piero della Francesca, Hieronymus Bosch and El Greco.



- F. ANONYMOUS The Flight into Egypt
The spontaneity and rich coloring of European religious primitivism is being rediscovered in Haiti today. Compare Colorplate B of "Adoration of the Virgin" by Bazile.



- G. JOAN MIRÓ: People and Bird in Moonlight
Sophisticated modern masters, to recapture primitive freshness, have gone to the drawings of children, the sculpture of Africa, the paintings of the self-taught.

Primitive painting itself may be divided into five types. First there is the painting by artists of a genuinely aboriginal society, from the prehistoric cave murals of Altamira to the great Bushman figure work of South Africa and the hide-paintings of the North American Indians. Secondly, comes the work of a sophisticated tradition of painting in its early phases, of which the frescoes of Giotto are a supreme example. The painting of unschooled or "popular" artists outside the main current of an advanced society constitutes a third grouping. This category, in addition to the Haitian school, includes the American "primitives" from Edward Hicks to Horace Pippin, the contemporary English painter, Alfred Wallis, Rousseau, Peyronnet, Bombois and the so-called "Sunday painters" of France. The unself-conscious art of children comprises a fourth classification. And the fifth consists of those sophisticated contemporary artists who have deliberately drawn upon stylistic features used unknowingly by the artists of the four preceding groups, in order to enrich, simplify, or revitalize the played-out naturalistic tradition.

African sculpture was "discovered" by the French painters Vlaminck, Derain and Matisse in 1904. Two years later Picasso drew upon its resources more directly in painting the stylized "Negroid" forms whose distortions and angled planes foreshadowed cubism. Boccioni and Barlach similarly rejuvenated sculpture about the same time. Paul Klee, and a little later Marc Chagall and Joan Miró, invoked the simultaneity of action and the freshness of draftsmanship in children's art to give their canvases a freedom of movement and wit that had been lost to Western painting since the days of Piero di Cosimo and the elder Breughel.

It is important to note that the painting of the "popular" artists with which we are concerned here often achieves its final artistic effect of magical directness in spite of the artist's intention. Perspective is distorted and the enveloping atmosphere is ignored in primitive painting out of necessity, but the result is to emphasize what is really important from the point of view of expression and color. Rousseau admired the academician Bouguereau excessively and thought that his own paintings were exact transcriptions of nature. Nevertheless, as Robert Goldwater has pointed out,¹ although it is the accidental rigidity of the forms that give Rousseau's pictures their effect of symbolic permanence, "this effect would not be possible without an intensity of feeling about the object or emotion to be portrayed, and without a belief in the psychological importance and aesthetic efficacy of his art that makes careful and minute delineation worth while."

¹ *Primitivism and Modern Painting* (Harper & Bros., New York, 1938).

Haiti and West Africa

Such careful and minute delineation is a chief characteristic of Haitian popular painting. The extent, however, to which this school derives its particular flavor from Africa is a question that we must return to briefly before considering the significance of Haitian painting in general. We have observed already the differences and similarities between religious art in West Africa and Haiti—how on the one hand African sculpture derived its formalistic intensity, its stylistic sophistication from a more integral relationship between fetish and ritual than exists generally speaking in Haiti; how on the other, the double tradition of *vodun* and Catholicism has contributed a richness to Haitian religious painting that makes it unique in the world today. It remains to emphasize the influence of the tradition of nonreligious and nonutilitarian African design; and the extent to which similarities between the African and Haitian way of life may shape the individual character of both schools of artists.

The quality of strictly amateur decoration in both areas is so close at times as to be indistinguishable. Crude sign-symbols drawn on the walls to keep away the evil spirits of the cross-roads or graveyard vary hardly at all. Spotted and wavy lines on the *cailles* of the Haitian south peninsula are less crude but similar to the Dahomean mural mottlings for Sagbata (smallpox) or wavy lines in honor of Dahn (the rainbow-snake). In both lands the ability to improvise, whether in music, the dance, or decoration, has been noted, and possibly in this respect the independent Haitian improvises more freely than his colonial cousin.

If, however, we advance one further step up the artistic ladder, and compare the wholly decorative brass-weights, war-masks, carved calabashes and appliqué cloths of Dahomey with the work of semi-professional craftsmen in Haiti, the advantage is wholly with the Dahomean, whose tradition in these skills has remained unbroken for centuries. The appliqué robes, in particular, pieced together out of shapes cut from varicolored materials and carried wherever display (as in funerals) is at a premium, are on a level of semi-abstract figure design that even the most talented Haitian painter rarely reaches. The purity of the silhouetted distortions and the consistency of their symbolism and arrangement bespeak a more knowing group-craftsmanship than the Haitian has so far developed.

Impure elements, however, like the neo-Greek sculptures dug up and imitated so passionately and unslavishly by the Italian masters, can play a

creative role in a culture vigorous enough not to be tormented by pedantic anxieties. In this respect, the Haitians have at their command a host of secondary resources quite beyond the reach of a true primitive society. In the amazing virtuosity for decoration which is displayed in so many of their paintings, one may trace such "foreign" elements as French floral needlework, American floursack stencils, cheap Latin-American religious prints, and the intricate lettering and scrollwork that embellish the bottle-labels on Florida water and patent medicines. Proof of the sound instinct behind this borrowing is in the fact that under the sure touch of the popular artist's brush, the vulgarity of the original has been (so far, at least) invariably transmuted into something rich and strange.



Sacrifice of Goat: Dahomean Appliqué

Ierskovits found the Dahomean artist very similar to artists anywhere: admired for his talents, but isolated by his nonconformism and regarded with some disdain because of his relative imperviousness to the rewards of politics and commerce. "They are likable men," a Dahomean woman confided to him, "but they are not good husbands. Months pass and they are interested in nothing but blocks of wood." The Haitian artist bears this relation to society only vis-à-vis the élite, who are scarcely aware of his existence in any case. In relation to his neighbors—the peasants, the servant class, or the unskilled workers—he has acquired social and financial prestige far in advance of the typical Haitian who deals directly with no *gros moulin* and whose average annual cash income is possibly less than twenty dollars.

Simple and Complex Primitivism

Contrary to a widely circulated legend, DeWitt Peters does not keep the primitive artists of the Centre d'Art in a blindered and sound-proof cage. They can, and do, move freely among the sophisticated artists. They attend exhibitions of the most advanced work from Paris and New York. They are at liberty to receive instruction, in painting or sculpture, if they desire it. The most that can be said is that Peters makes a distinction between two types of primitive artist. Those lacking education, and primarily of peasant background and association, he encourages to paint at home—at least until such time as their styles become fixed beyond the point of confused imitation. Any popular painter, on the other hand, who shows the slightest inclination to "pass over the line" into an awareness of such problems as perspective, deliberate fantasy, or conscious abstraction, is encouraged to attend lectures or work with the more advanced artists. Naturally enough not every painter fits tidily into one or the other of these categories, and it is the borderline "cases" that offer the most revealing commentary on the creative process.

Castera Bazile, Dieudonné Cédor and Fernand Pierre exemplify best the painter who remains untouched by outside influence. All of them have worked in the Centre at one time or another and all now work at home.

Bazile is the purest example of the type. Illiterate, highly sensitive, he developed almost at the outset of his career a strongly individual naïve style from which he has never deviated except in the direction of greater control and surer juxtaposition of primary colors. In Haiti, the peasant, in the broad sense of the term, is just as likely to be found within a few blocks of the center of the capital as in the remote ridges of Morne La Selle or the dust-



Castera Bazile with Adoration of the Virgin I

white villages of Savanne Désolée. Bois St.-Martin, where Castera Bazile lives, is within a few hundred yards of the Cathedral and a stone's throw of the national broadcasting station. It is also within ten minutes' walking distance of two of the most active *houmfors* in Haiti. And the group of *cailles* in which the painter has his single eight by four-foot room differs in no essential from those to be found in any poverty-stricken part of the island.

To pass from the noisy yard, with its hard-packed earth, chickens and pigs, its central group of women pounding corn with a wooden pestle or cooking black rice over charcoal in an iron pot; its dozen or more half-naked children running in and out of the ragged cactus hedge or peering solemnly



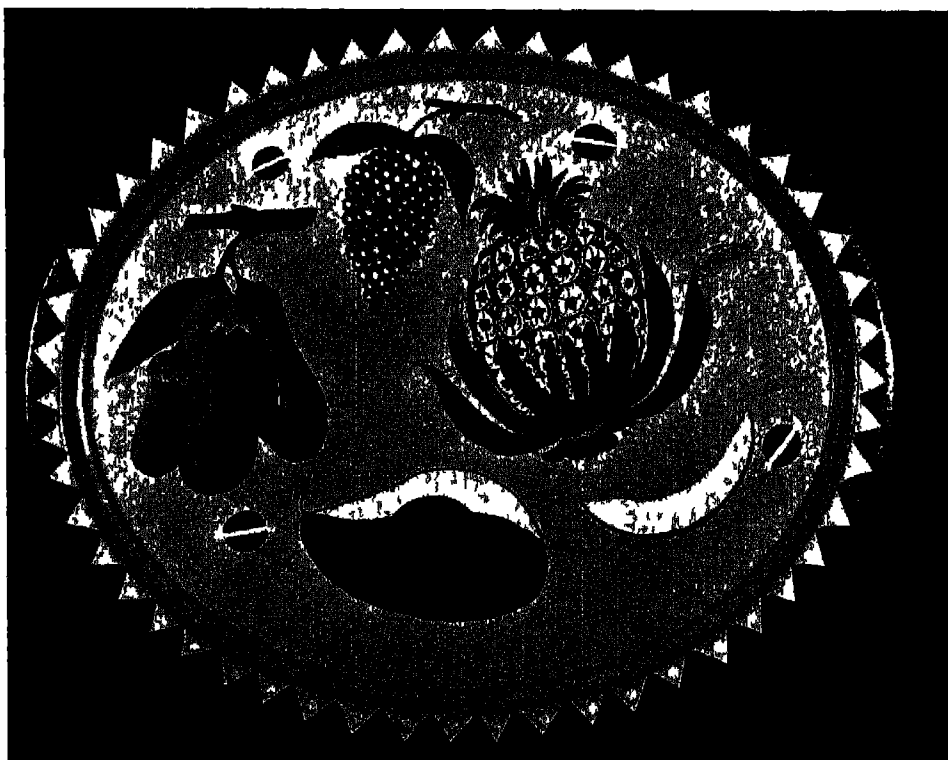
Painted Box by Bazile

from behind a rainbarrel—to pass from this into the room with its single piece of furniture, a cot, on which are arrayed a half-dozen of the most brilliantly colored street-scenes and religious compositions imaginable, is to understand the dedication of a true primitive. Bazile has banked several hundred dollars—a fortune in Haiti—in the past year but he never draws on it; his needs are amply taken care of, he says, by three dollars a week, approximately what he earned as a houseboy. He would not dream of moving to more luxurious surroundings. He is happy enough to have found his true vocation, the means of giving glorious expression to the life he knows and loves.

Cédor, an artist with less natural talent but with a slightly more ambitious or roving eye, has been hardly more affected by fame and fortune. He continues to live with his mother in a tiny *caille* in the Morne Marinette district of the capital. He is going to night school in order some day to read the

French poets. He is a very reserved and reticent person but he confided once that when he paints "it seems as though it were my blood I am putting on the canvas." Cédor is at his best when painting semi-abstract designs on boxes, simple arrangements of native flowers or fruit, or such a stylized decoration as the "portrait" of Toussaint Louverture (Plate 18), copied unquestionably from a schoolbook engraving, but given a life of its own by the starkness of the flat silhouette as contrasted with its playfully ornamental border. He is at his worst in a large figure picture that demands skillful grouping or sustained balancing of masses.

Fernand Pierre, a painter with more imagination than Bazile and a greater feeling for texture than Cédor, may perhaps develop beyond primitivism if circumstances permit him to become, like them, a professional painter.



Painted Tray by Cédor



Fernand Pierre at Work on a Box

Dependent upon the ten dollars a week he makes as an *ébéniste* in Carrefour, the half-dozen pictures he has so far painted have not brought him enough steady income to permit a change of occupation. Yet Pierre seems equally at home in still-life, village landscape, or *vodun* tableau. His "Maitresse La Sirène" with her pink-and-white skullcap and mermaid's tail, rising from a pale suggestion of sea, between delicate curtains and roses, trumpet in one hand and flag in the other, is an unforgettably delicate evocation. His "Zombi" (Plate 24) is as startlingly realistic and monochromatic as his "Old Mill at Mont Repos" (Plate 25), with its sharply contrasted yellow doors, electric-blue walls and crimson shutters is supernatural. Asked why the sea in the latter picture had been painted fire-red, Pierre answered unhesitatingly, "Because nature must be de-composed; the red sea balances the blue mill."

Still more isolated, in Baint and Croix des Bouquets respectively, and therefore still less predictable in regard to the inherent stability of their naïve styles, are Micius Stephane and Toussaint Auguste. Use of the completely two-dimensional picture plane gives to the work of both of these

gifted painters a pictographic quality reminiscent of prehistoric cave drawing. The scales of Stephane's fish are scratched into the Sapolin with a sharp stick and sometimes appropriately roughened with smears of beach-sand. His supernatural birds (Plate 30) have every right to dominate the landscape. Auguste's barnyard scenes (Frontispiece) have a quantitative compulsion and clarity of detail that triumph over any conventional requirement for balanced grouping.

The Case of Rigaud B noit

Rigaud B noit, one of the most admired and successful of Haitian popular painters, began in the following fashion. "The Market" (Plate 1), a canvas 24" x 36" now in the permanent collection of the Centre d'Art, and his first important picture, contains seventy-five human figures and a score of animals. The haphazard but satisfying arrangement is reminiscent of the similarly crowded pageant-pictures of Benozzo Gozzoli and Gentile Bellini.



Micus Stephane with Early Paintings: Bainet



The Market: Detail by Benoît

Like the Italian masters, Benoît avoids surface monotony by alternating areas of bare hillside or roadway with flatly patterned areas of cultivation; and like them he achieves over-all unity not by perspective but by its negation—the giving of slightly more stature to the few figures in the background than he accords to the smaller individuals intricately grouped in the foreground. As for color, the over-all areas of pink pathway, green hills and more brilliantly green shrubs and trees provide but an harmonic frame for the counterpoint of human activity: orange doors with black hinges on white *cailles*; handsomely striped cows and goats; peasant women in bright red or blue bandanas; white cassavas on black cooking-irons; an orange woodpecker on a striped royal-palm trunk.

Benoît's development as a painter might be graphed in the shape of a letter V. His first pictures, like the "Landscape" (Plate 3), have a magical though childlike perfection. With the shock of discovering discrepancies between his own work and that of apparently "mature" academic draftsmen

H. LOUVERTURE POISSON: Peasant Toilette



his painting moves steadily downhill. Close to the bottom he rediscovers the natural "style" of which he had been originally unconscious. The next stage of his career (since temperament and circumstances militate against his becoming truly "sophisticated") is spent in ascending the path of his decline, in search of his lost innocence, an image that finally emerges, significantly transformed, as "A King of Africa."

Three pictures illustrate this artistic hegira. In "The Three Mysterious Women" (Plate 2), one of the last and most triumphant of his early pictures, B noit has simplified his original vision almost to the point of symbolic abstraction. The horses, trees, rice-plants and characteristic Haitian hills of "The Market" are there, but used sparingly and more deliberately as compositional props. The Archangel Michael who is warning the man in black-magician's cap to beware of the siren's message (it reads, "Give me your family completely and we'll turn over the treasure to you") is a figure lifted whole out of a ten-cent Cuban chromolithograph. The skeleton, on the other hand, by which the angel points his warning is imaginatively conceived and executed.

The authenticity of this picture both as folklore and as dream contrasts glaringly with a picture called "Night" which B noit executed only a year later, in the period of his confusion and discouragement. A woman and her child are sleeping on a bed in a very sparsely furnished room. A snake is drinking milk from one of the mother's breasts while with its forked tail



Rigaud B noit with Luce Turnier



King of Africa by Bénéito

it is suffocating the baby. Bénéito's only explanation of this picture was that "such things happen every day among the peasants." Whatever the allegory and the artist's interpretation of it may offer in the way of comment on his frustration and momentary antagonism to his own people, the actual quality of the painting—thin, denying primary colors and concentrating so pitifully on the perspective of a central group of chairs that the lurid spectacle in the corner is lost—documented clearly enough the artist's state of mind.

Bénéito's uphill but surprisingly successful struggle to recapture his original vision is unique among the popular painters. He has solved the problem, at least for himself, by abstracting elements of pure design—flowers, buildings and symbolic African figures—and grouping them for wholly pictorial effect on a flat picture plane. Three other painters of as great talent, Cayemitte, Wilson Bigaud and Poisson have been by no means as fortunate in their effort to recapture what their superior education or powers of analysis lost them.

Cayemitte, Poisson, Wilson Bigaud

Discovery of his ability to paint came to Cayemitte like a stroke of lightning and left him almost as dramatically. His first picture was a simple red-roofed *caille* flanked by a chair and recumbent dog. His second, entitled "The Miraculous Rain," began to indicate the artist's preoccupation with complex symbolism. Directly above a burning *caille* is imposed a second image of the same hut from which a pillar of smoke is lifting and out of which a peasant family is emerging to conduct its business unconcerned.

Both pictures sold instantly. On the third, which was to be still more complex but quite as successful, Cayemitte went to work in a real frenzy. He left his family to work nights in the Centre d'Art. He announced to Peters that "in art, nature must be sacrificed to beauty." And upon his "Magic Tree" (Plate 31), with which the Anti-Christ is tempting a group of respectable shopkeepers, he hung a truly magical assortment of fruits and flowers. The draftsmanship was primitive but the colors were not.

The picture was admired but remained unsold. It was sent to New York to be exhibited. Cayemitte painted one more picture, a really fantastic allegory this time, of an island combining all the features of a well-populated schooner and a whale, but executed with a poorly combined mélange of surrealism, semi-academic draftsmanship and primitivism. Then he stopped painting, with the announcement that he was being persecuted in Peters' absence, that the *vodun* of the popular painters was superstition fit only for children or tourists, and that he had more important work to do devising a proper philosophical foundation for his own religious beliefs.

Wilson Bigaud and Louverture Poisson, both of whom are trying to resolve the dilemma which overwhelmed Cayemitte, began their artistic careers with the same kind of facility in story-telling. They differed from Cayemitte in being realists, at least in painterly terms.

Poisson nevertheless was, more than any other of the popular painters,



Minium Cayemitte

an artist concerned with symbolizing his own state of mind. Born in Cayes in 1914, he worked as a salesman in an export-import house and had two children by a peasant mistress before coming to Port-au-Prince in 1942. He began to paint in 1945. The following year he married the daughter of Faustin Wirkus, the "White King of La Gonave," and after failing to qualify as a pilot at Bowen Field, was assigned to checking the enrollment of recruits at a sergeant's pay of thirty-five a month. Although he made five hundred dollars from the sale of his first few pictures that year, he has not felt willing to sacrifice the security of his job, and as time has gone on has painted less and less.

Poisson's neurotic, or at least highly introspective, personality is least apparent in his first picture, the extraordinarily finished "Adam and Eve" (Plate 27). The picture reveals, however, both Poisson's unusual feeling for composition, anatomy and mood, and his evident familiarity (through magazine illustration?) with the main currents of European art. His next three pictures—"Peasant Toilette" (Colorplate H), "The Doors" (Plate 28) and "Crime of Passion" (Plate 29)—miniature masterpieces whose secret Poisson has never been able to recapture, disclose as well his subjective preoccupation. All three are characterized by mystery and horror, a sense of being trapped within four walls beyond the refuge of serene nature as glimpsed (unattainably) through windows, and the last two have in addition that theme of sexuality, frustrated and menacing, that was to dominate all the later pictures of Poisson's first year. These later pictures almost invariably missed fire. The luminous atmosphere is lost. The colors become unpleasantly obscure, with predominating olives and browns. With a sense of this failure, perhaps evoked only by Peters' disappointment and the fact that the canvases no longer found buyers, Poisson turned to frankly surrealist subject matter and techniques. But now the tendency to copy, which in the "Adam and Eve" produced a picture startlingly in key with 15th century Italian religious work, led only to arid reminiscences of shattered walls, dime-novel encounters and, in general, academic bad taste. Poisson, clearly, is a painter who would benefit from the opportunity to study the origin and significance of modern painting.

The talent of Wilson Bigaud is as sharply focused on the pictureque exterior world as that of Poisson is on the morbid inner one. Yet Bigaud, for all the fact that his pictures deal exclusively with cock-fights, *vodun* dances, domestic scenes, barroom brawls and wakes, is not a painter of the folk in the sense that Obin is. He is a product of the Haitian renaissance, or,



Wilson Bigaud

if you like, of the Centre d'Art, and there is little reason to suppose he would have painted at all had Hyppolite and Peters not piqued his curiosity and aroused his slumbering capacity for reflection. Nor is this said in any criticism of Bigaud or of the Centre. Can anyone argue that most of the thousands of painters and hundreds of masters spawned by the Italian Renaissance would have painted, if the spirit of the times had not made art a natural and worth-while occupation?

Being exceptionally endowed with quickness of perception and the capacity to reproduce with technical accuracy (though in his own terms) what he has seen of other painting, it is not surprising that young Bigaud

arrived at a resolution in regard to the problem of "advanced" painting that was quite at odds with that of any other of the popular painters. Depending on the bias of the observer it could be called dishonestly opportunistic or thoroughly practical.

Consider two of Bigaud's early pictures, "The Wake" (Plate 22) and "Dice Game" (Colorplate I). Both exhibit a talent for mirroring the native scene in terms of *action* that is quite beyond the capacity (or interest) of any other Haitian painter.¹ Negatively, both have a superficiality, a certain "quaintness" that was until recently Bigaud's characteristic limitation.

¹ Compare the details of the former picture with the Thoby-Marcelins' description in *Canapé-Vert*: "The dance broke up in general abandon, the Hounsies staggering around and making the raucous sounds of those 'possessed.' . . . From the *caille* . . . came the clamor of noisy hymns, boisterously bawled in a silly, languishing manner. The wake was in full spate. The moon disappeared behind a great black cloud outlined in silver, that floated slowly from the sea on the wings of the west wind. Seated near the fires eating, men and women roared with laughter at stories that had lost no savor by constant retelling, for each reciter revived them with his own wit. Other guests, their faces glistening with sweat, their eyes red, their breath fetid, vociferated loudly as they struck the tables with dice cups or dominoes. Others, more reserved, indulged in interminable card games. The wind, searching through the whole countryside, blew under the large kettles, raising and lowering the flames, lighting up the somber faces, or blotting them out altogether. . . ."



The Coffee Carriers by Bigaud

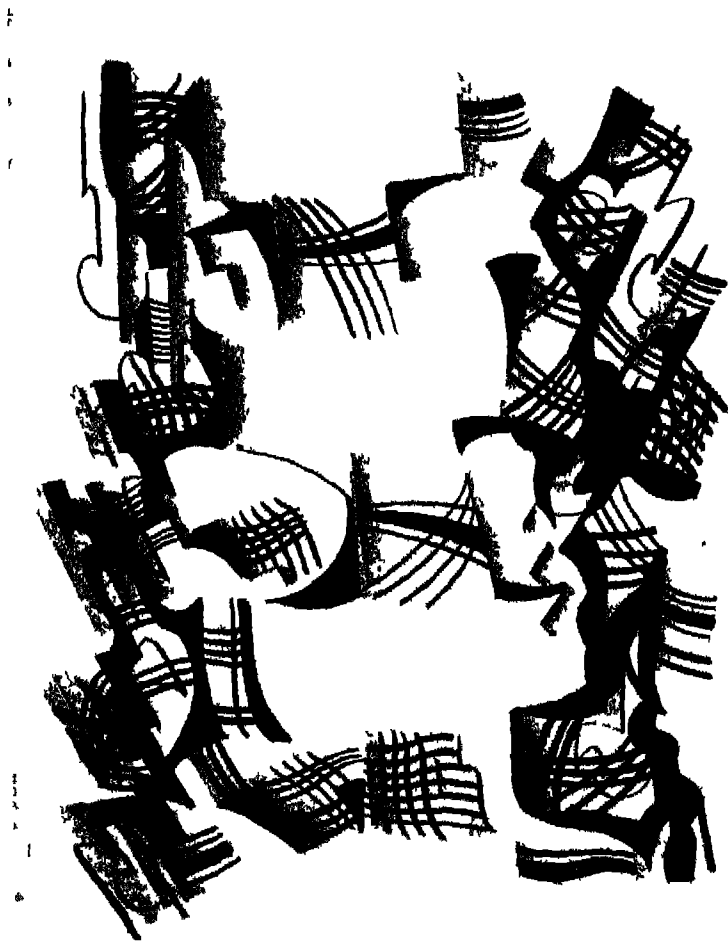


Lucien Price

It was not long before Bigaud realized that he could quite as easily mimic the distortions and simplifications of more "sophisticated" art. One day, without prompting and seemingly without any preparation, he walked to the Centre from his *caille* in the red-light district of the capital, with "The Coffee Carriers" under his arm. Peters was astonished. Here was a picture that achieved the effect that the Centre's sophisticated painters were straining after laboriously, and with apparent ease. It was in no sense an "original" picture, nor a particularly "good" one by Paris or New York standards, but it was accomplished and wholly nonprimitive. Peters complimented him, though with misgivings, and hung the canvas prominently in his office. Visitors, who had come to look for something else in Haitian painting, said nice things about it but went on buying the "cruder" but obviously more spontaneous works. And Bigaud himself, who had hitherto done very well indeed in the matter of sales, made a quick decision. He went back to painting "primitive" pictures—pictures in which, surprisingly, quaintness has given way to mastery of detail without sacrifice of charm.

Haiti's Sophisticated Painters

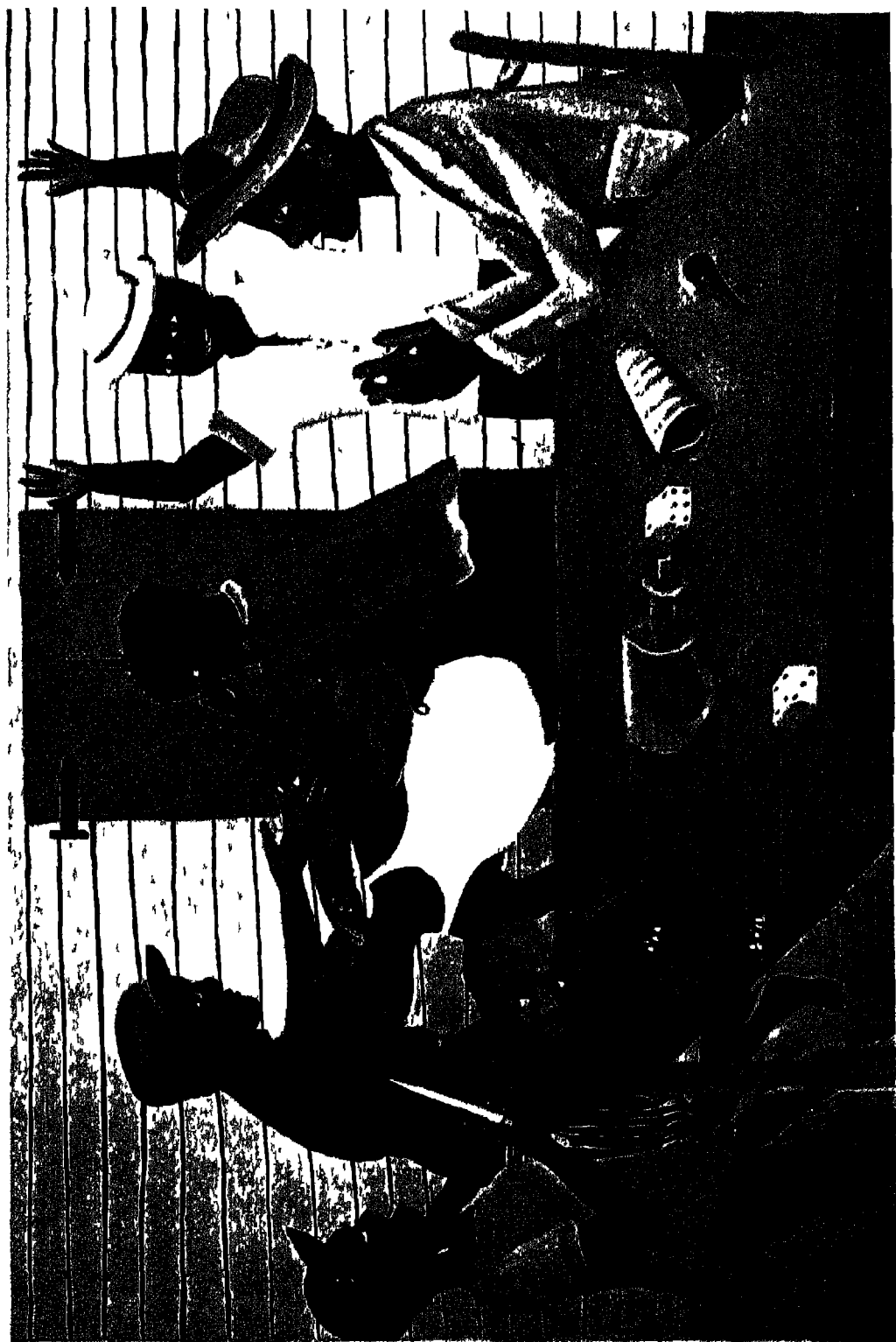
The abyss that separates the popular painters of Haiti from the native "sophisticates" is a disturbing phenomenon. How can it be bridged? Can it be bridged? What caused it? Why is it that the Haitian renaissance is accompanied by little of the general intellectual awakening and public sponsorship that characterized the Mexican renaissance of the twenties? One explanation,



Chant d'Afrique No. 1 by Price

perhaps the principal one, has already been touched upon in an earlier chapter. The profound gap that already existed between the educated franco-phile class in Haiti on the one hand, and the peasant with his African religion and graphic tradition on the other, could not be surmounted in a generation, much less in a year.

The very small coterie of intellectuals and trained painters in Port-au-Prince was painfully aware of its alienation from African Haiti. But the outlook of a century of mulatto provincialism was not something that could



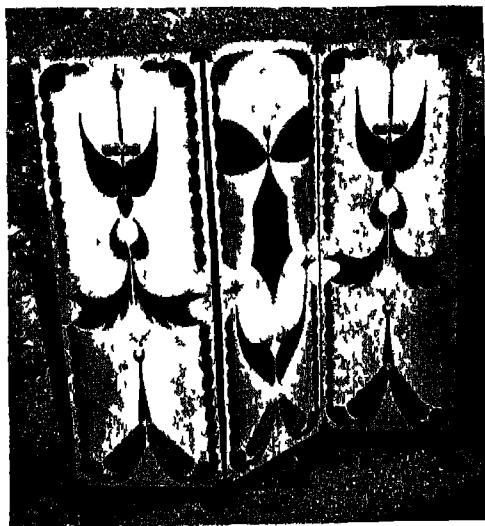
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1. WILSON BIGAUD: Dice Game

be overcome overnight—particularly in an art that depends to so very great a degree as does painting on factors beyond the control of the will or the conscious mind.

Lucien Price, an extremely sensitive aristocrat who had been educated in France, tried to effect the rapprochement by abstract drawings of barbaric patterns bearing such titles as "*Chant d'Afrique*," etc. They are striking, but one feels they could as easily have sprung from Montparnasse or Bloomsbury. Maurice Borno, a great-nephew of the mulatto president of Marine days, and Luce Turnier, the courageously independent twenty-four-year-old daughter of an impoverished élite family, have done notable painting in styles that perhaps try too deliberately to circumscribe the national scene in monumental simplifications (Plates 33, 34). Léon Agnant, another young mulatto artist, educated and alert, has achieved in his screens and decorated boxes an original style based on stylization of native plant and insect forms, but in his canvases, where he tries to allegorize incidents of native life by scrambling a variety of images, the effect has been amateurish and confused. The less ambitious work of such artists as Luckner Lazare, Antonio Joseph, Georges Ramponneau and Jean-Baptiste Bottex has escaped this particular pitfall.

A second explanation of the difficulties encountered by these artists applies



Screen by Léon Agnant

with special force to the work of Borno and Turnier. In the early days of the Centre, before the popular school had appeared, Peters held a large exhibition of contemporary Cuban painting. The exhibition had unfortunate consequences for a number of reasons. For one, the impressionable Haitian artists, familiar up to that moment with little but academic painting, were uncritically impressed. For another, an art partly indigenous to an alien Hispanic culture was bound to produce conflicting results when applied to the Haitian scene. For a third, the pervasive influence of Picasso's style which has affected all of Western painting for a generation and literally dominated the Cuban school, came to the educated Haitians without any historical preparation, and in the baneful second-hand guise of mannerism. Subsequently such Cuban artists as Wifredo Lam, Louis Martinez-Pedro, Cundo Bermudes and Roberto Diago received exhibits at the Centre or visited it to give lectures and demonstrations of their working methods. Only now are Borno, Turnier and the others beginning to realize that they must shake off this influence and establish closer contact with the world of the popular painters if their own work is to have any national originality.

Looking Ahead

This lack of a fusion of intellectual and folk elements is one of the dilemmas of the Haitian renaissance. Another is posed by Haiti itself. In the tiny fishing village of Anse Rouge, bordering the desert northeast of Gonaives, a

Vodun Ceremony
by Gabriel Arthus



town so "backward" that all fresh water must be transported to it by pail in precarious fishing sloops, significant painting is being done; in fact, the aesthetic life of this tiny community has been so aroused that the peasants have subsequently staged theatricals and spirited cultural discussions.

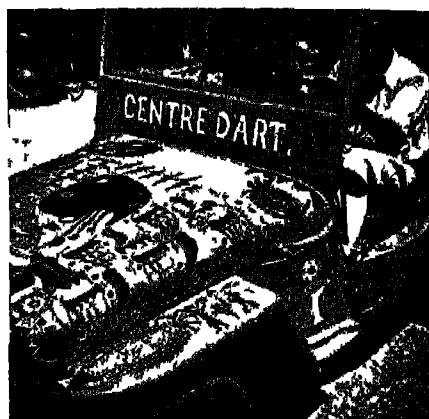
Anse Rouge, like Baint, Arbreville, Plaisance and Coridon, is a spectacular exception when considered in terms of Haiti as a whole. In similarly isolated villages—like Bombardopolis, Limonade and Bunda Mouillé in the North; Picmi, Marse Edouard and Boucan Légume on Ile de la Gonave; Saltrou, Blockhouse,¹ Les Irois, Pot de Chambre and Jamais Vu in the South—the activities and opportunities offered by the Centre d'Art are undreamed of. And in the larger towns efforts to start branches without paid supervisors have consistently been blocked by the local ruling families who seek to impose their provincial taste on the bewildered beginners.

The problem here is financial. With as little as \$1,000 a month, the Centre d'Art would be in a position to set up and supervise branches in all the principal cities, from which in turn field trips could be organized to outlying towns and villages. With the current budget of \$400 a month any activity outside the capital is at best haphazard.

A third restriction on the growth of the movement is imposed by the apathy of the ruling class. Haitians with the means to do so, do not buy Haitian pictures. The government has yet to commission a mural or buy a picture for a public building. Restaurant owners balk at spending as little as \$100 to have a whole series of rooms decorated with scenes of native life. The wealthy hotels, even the new and exquisitely appointed Roi Christophe in Cap-Haitien, within a few blocks of Obin's school, prefer to hang their walls with cheap reproductions, hunting prints and academic nudes. It is significant, and pathetic, that the only collective painting enterprise in Haiti is DeWitt Peters' jeep. So consuming is the passion of the popular artists to work together, and on some project more functional than a canvas to be bought by a tourist, that the jeep has been washed out and completely repainted no less than three times in the past year. On its fenders, dashboard, tailgate and hood the artists vie with each other in imagination: Hyppolite, Bénéoit, Gourgue, Bazile and the rest lavishing on its ephemeral chassis their richest gifts.

Is it necessary to add anything about the significance of the Haitian experi-

¹ Names of English derivation in the South date from the period between 1791 and 1796 when the English attempted to steal a march on the French by backing the disaffected mulattoes there.



Centre d'Art Jeep

ment in terms of its possible application in other countries? The accomplishment of so much with so very little should speak for itself. It is worth emphasizing once more that nowhere else in the world today is painting springing to such an extent from the hands of ordinary people inspired by no "influence" other than their lives, their surroundings, their inherited beliefs and their natural capacity for aesthetic expression.

In terms of modern painting generally, primitivism, at least as a source and an inspiration, is here to stay. The other major tendency in contemporary work—abstraction—is being reduced to sterility by its own exponents; purists like Piet Mondrian carried nonobjective painting to such an icy point of geometric ellipsis that the bare canvas remained the logical next step. It is true that primitivism represents an "escape" from our complex, urban, mechanized life. But it is a healthful and necessary escape. Harmony, simplicity, spontaneity and a direct statement of the unity of nature and man, are exactly what modern art and life must recapture if they are to survive.



"Grand Gout Manqué Tuyé Moin!"

GLOSSARY OF CREOLE AND OTHER TERMS

- AFFRANCHI—a freed slave under the French in St.-Domingue, generally a mulatto.
- ARMOIRE—cabinet for clothing.
- ASSON—a gourde rattle, decorated with snake vertebrae and beads, and having a small bell attached to it; the houngan's symbol of authority.
- BAGAILLE—Creole word for "thing," "gadget," "it."
- BAMBOCHE—dance, festive gathering, party.
- BOCOR—a sorcerer, "black" magician.
- BULA—the smallest drum in a 'rada triad, played with two sticks.
- CACOS—guerrilla fighters who opposed the American Marines.
- CAILLE—house, home; more specifically one of the African-type thatched huts.
- CAIMAN—species of crocodile native to the Haitian rivers and lakes.
- CAMION—an omnibus or truck.
- COULEV'—a snake.
- COUMBITE—a cooperative work gang, often including a drummer to accompany the work songs.
- CRISE DE POSSESSION—state of auto-hypnosis or religious seizure in which the vodun participant is "mounted" by his loa.
- ÉBÉNISTE—a carpenter or cabinet-maker.
- ÉLITE—the ruling caste.
- GENS DE COULEUR—the mulatto caste in St.-Domingue.
- GROS NEG'—peasant term for a member of the ruling caste, a "big shot."
- HOUMFOR—the caille which contains the houngan's altar.
- HOUNGAN—a vodun priest.
- HOUNSI—one of the houngan's staff of female assistants.
- IBO—one of the vodun cults, having its own pantheon of loa; Ibo worshipers are found predominantly in the South.
- KANZO—vodun initiation rite.
- LAMBI—a conch; also its meat, and the shell used as a musical instrument.
- LOA—a vodun god.
- LOUP-GAROU—a werewolf, generally visualized as a devil with bat's wings.

- MACANDA—a bocor's bamboche; the term probably derives from Macandel, the marron chieftain of the mid-eighteenth century.
- MACOUTE—peasant knapsack made of shredded palm fronds or sisal.
- MAMAN—largest drum in the 'rada triad, played with hands and a wooden mallet.
- MANGÉ LOA—vodun ceremony in which the loa are offered various foods and drinks.
- MARASSA—twins, generally regarded as sacred, and their personification among the loa.
- MARRON—an escaped slave who lived in the mountains under the French.
- MIDZIMU—South African equivalent of the loa.
- MORNE—a mountain. (A moune morne is therefore a mountain peasant.)
- MOUNE—a person, man, "one."
- MYSTÈRE—synonymous with loa.
- OGANTIER—musician who accompanies drummers by striking together two pieces of metal.
- PAPALOI—obsolete title of a houngan.
- PAQUET CONGO—ceremonial doll containing magical ingredients, used in certain vodun ceremonies.
- PÉTRO—one of the vodun cults, predominantly of the South peninsula.
- PISTON—peasant trumpet, made of a papaya stem.
- PITI MI—millet or sorghum.
- 'RADA—the dominant vodun cult, derived from the African Allada tribe.
- RA-RA—elaborate dance festivals celebrated all over Haiti during Lent. Not to be confused with Mardi Gras.
- SECONDE—the middle drum (and drummer) in the 'rada triad.
- TONNELLE—a thatched veranda, supported by poles; when adjoining a hounfor it shelters the vodun ceremony and dance.
- VACCINE—a bamboo trumpet used in ra-ra festivals.
- VEVERS—geometrical drawings in flour with which the houngan invokes the loa.
- VODUN—general term for the worship of ancient African deities and the Catholic saints with which the former are sometimes identified.
- ZOMBI—one of the dead who has been resurrected by a sorcerer to work for him as an automaton.

PLATES

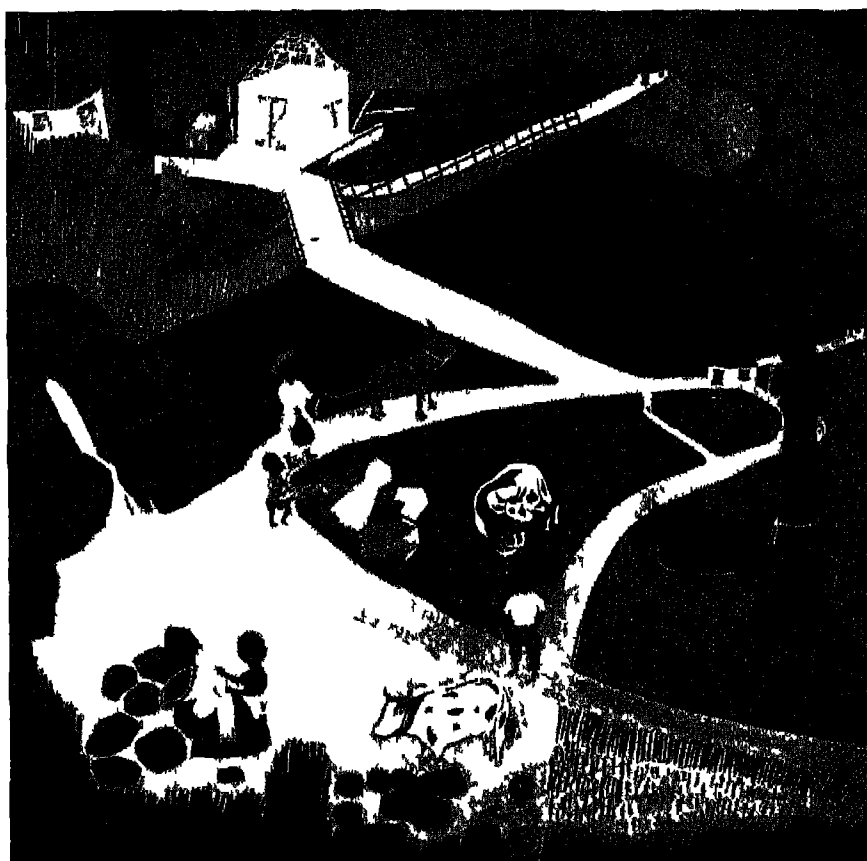




I. RIGAUD BÉNOÎT: The Market



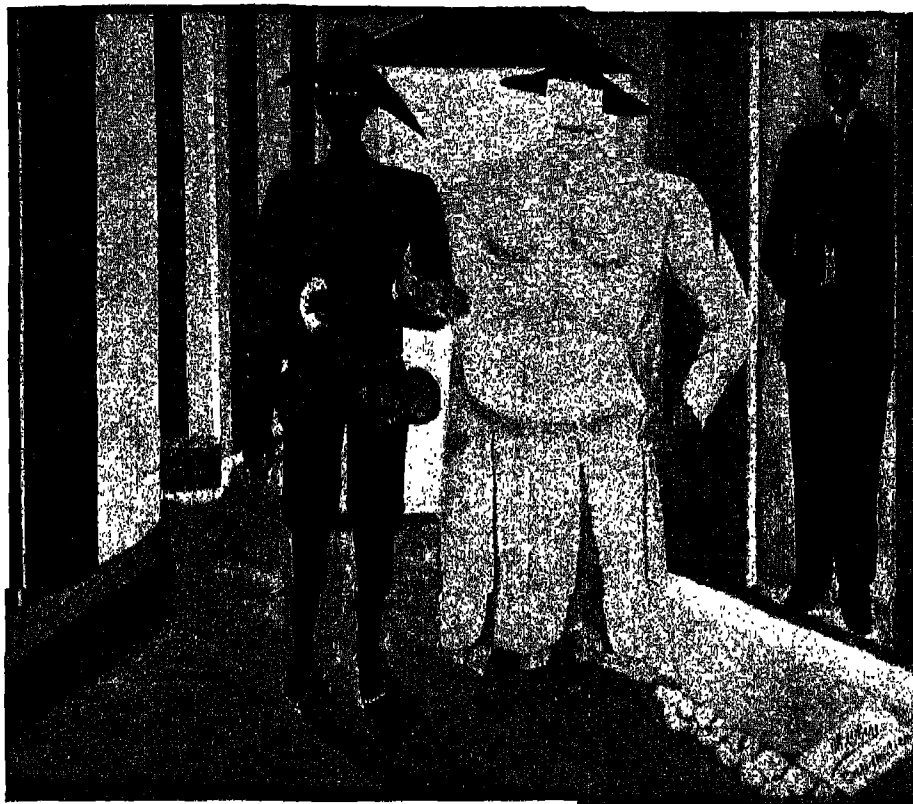
2. RIGAUD BÉNOÏ The Three Mysterious Women



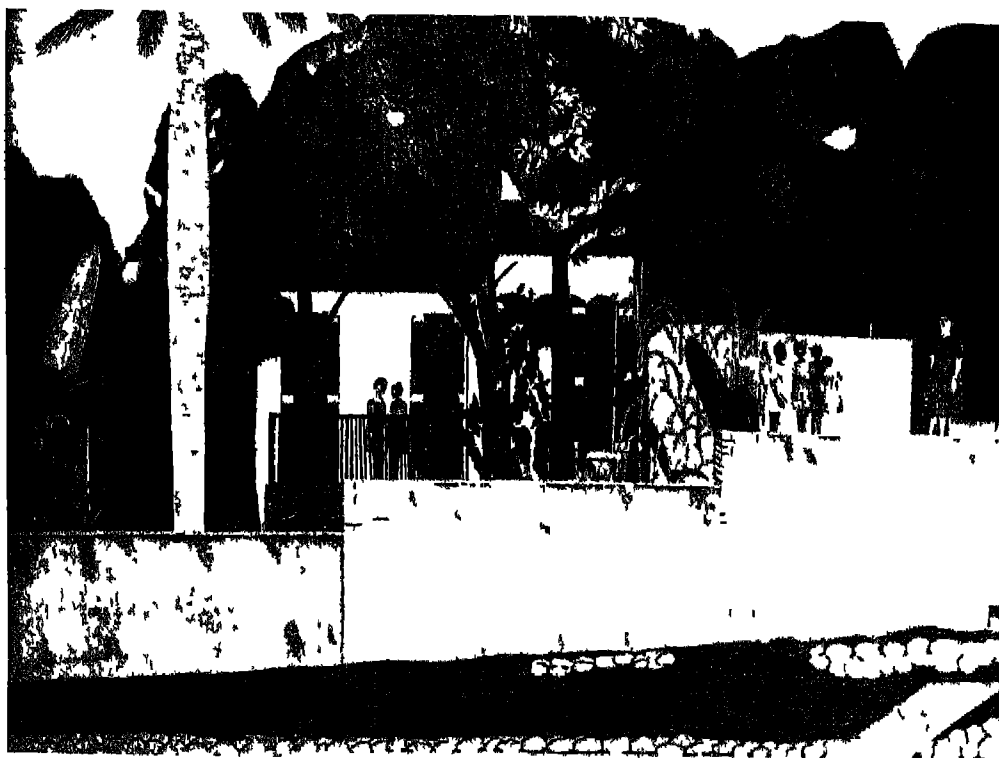
3 RIGAUD BÉNOÎT. Landscape Detail



4 PHILOMÉ OBIN: Roosevelt's Arrival at Cap-Haitien



5. PHILOMÉ OBIN: Mardi Gras



6. PHILOMÉ OBIN: The Orphanage at Bolosse



7. PHILOMÉ OBIN: Gontran Rouzier, Prisoner



8. PHILOMÉ OBIN: Dance at the Home of Fédermé Valcourt



9. HECTOR HYPPOLITE: Vodun Gods



10. HECTOR HYPPOLITE: Black Magic



11. HECTOR HYPPOLITE Nude Woman



12. HECTOR HYPPOLITE: The Lovers



13. HECTOR HYPPOLITE: Jean-Jacques Dessalines



14. HECTOR HYPPOLITE: Gréssier Road



15. HECTOR HYPPOLITE: Papa Ogoun and Papa Zaca



16. HECTOR HYPPOLITE: *Macanda*



17. GABRIEL ALIX: Street Scene



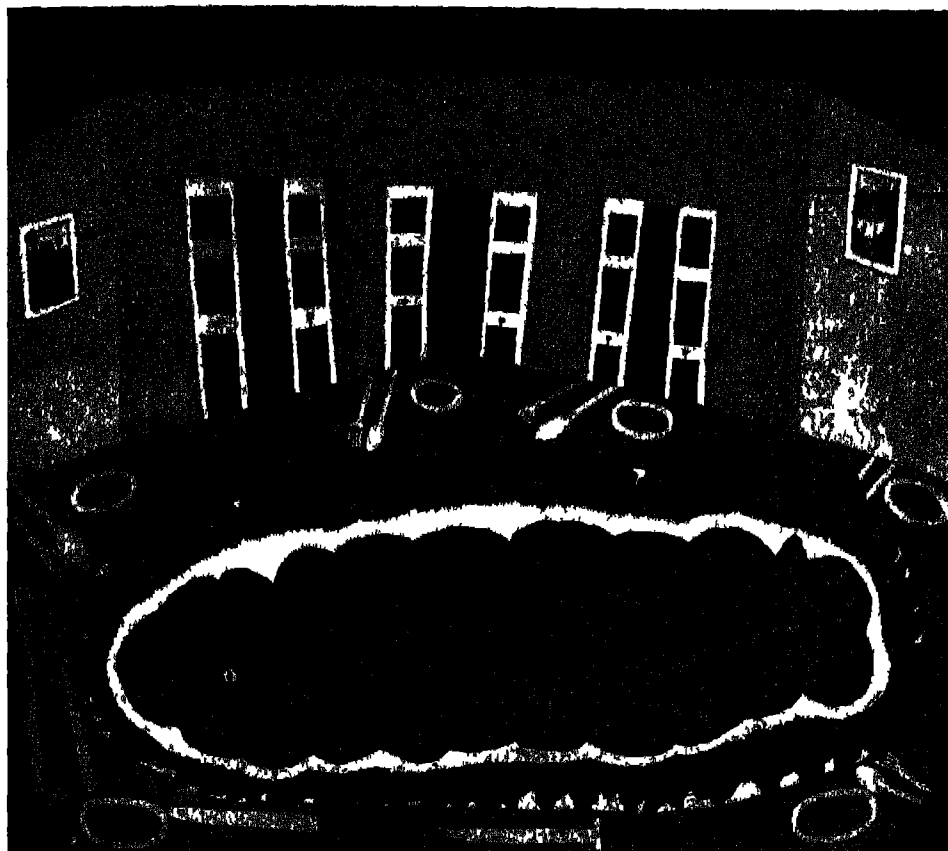
18. DIFUDONNÉ CÉDOR Toussaint Louverture



19. DIEUDONNÉ CÉDOR: Still Life. Flowers



20. ENGUERRAND GOURGUE: Ceremonial Dance



21. CASTERA BAZILE: Still Life: Fish



22. WILSON BIGAUD: The Wake



23. ANDRÉ BOUCARD: Pursuit of Runaway Slaves



24. FERNAND PIERRE: The Zombi



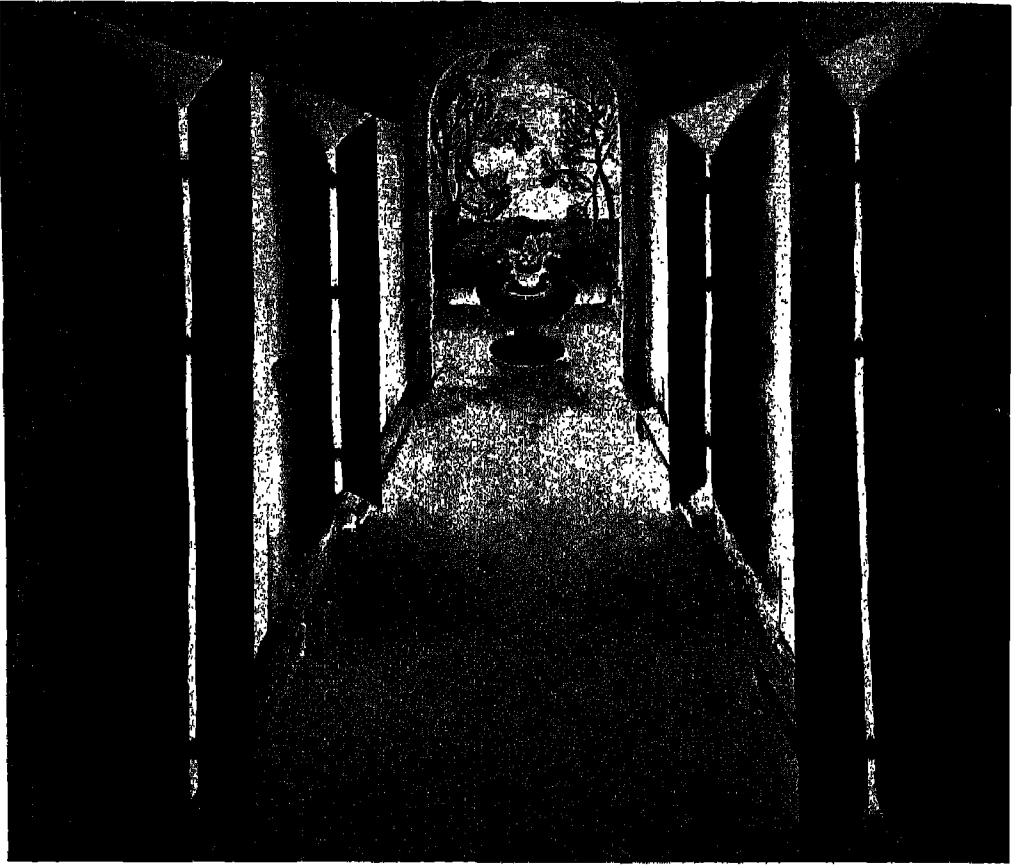
25. FERNAND PIERRE: The Old Mill at Mon Repos



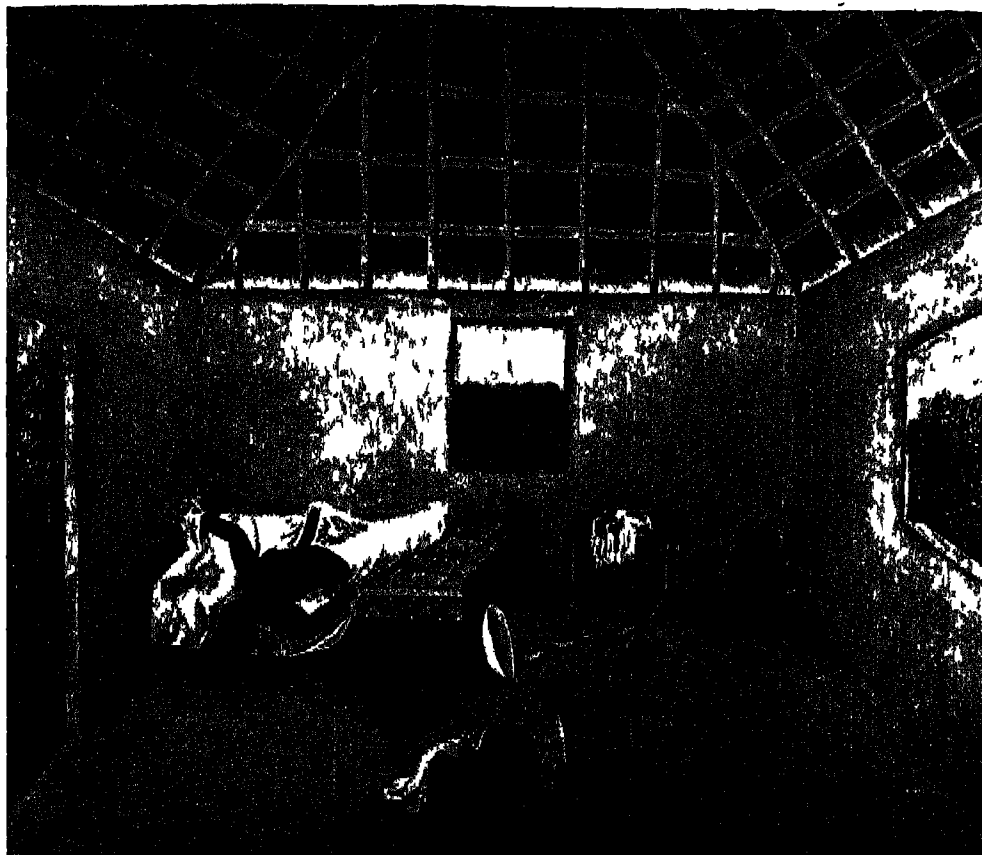
26. FERNAND PIERRE: Exorcizing Demons



27 L'OUVERTURE POISSON Adam and Eve The Original Sin



28. LOUVERTURE POISSON: The Doors



29. LOUVERTURE POISSON: Crime of Passion



30. MICIUS STEPHANE: The Birds



31. MINIMUM CAYEMITTE: The Magic Tree



32. TOUSSAINT AUGUSTE: Vodun Baptismal Rite



33. MAURICE BORNO: Peasant, Cooking



34. LUCE TURNER: Peasant Girl with Comb

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